

by Unknown

MOST DAYS I WISH I was a British pound coin in stead of an African girl. Ev ery one would be pleased to see me com ing. Maybe I would vis it with you for the week end and then sud den ly, be cause I am fick le like that, I would vis it with the man from the cor ner shop in steadbut you would not be sad because you would be eat ing a cin na mon bun, or drink ing a cold Co ca-?Co la from the can, and you would nev er think of me again. We would be hap py, like lovers who met on hol iday and for got each oth ers names. A pound coin can go wher ev er it thinks it will be safest. It can cross deserts and oceans anontd leave the sound of gun fire and the bit ter smell of burn ing thatch be hind. When it feels warm and se cure it will turn around and smile at you, the way my big sis ter Nkiru ka used to smile at the men in our vil lage in the short sum mer af ter she was a girl but be fore she was re al ly a wom an, and cer tain ly be fore the evening my moth er took her to a qui et place for a se ri ous talk. Of course a pound coin can be se ri ous too. It can dis guise it self as pow er, or prop er ty, and there is noth ing more se ri ous when you are a girl who has nei ther. You must try to catch the pound, and trap it in your pock et, so that it can not reach a safe coun try un less it takes you with it. But a pound has all the tricks of a sor cer er. When pur sued I have seen it shed its tail like a lizard so that you are left hold ing on ly pence. And when you fi nal ly go to seize it, the British pound can per form the great est mag ic of all, and this is to trans form it self in to not one, but two, iden ti cal green Amer ican dol lar bills. Your fin gers will close on emp ty air, I am telling you. How I would love to be a British pound. A pound is free to trav el to safe ty, and we are free to watch it go. This is the hu man tri umph. This is called, glob al iza tion. A girl like me gets stopped at im mi gra tion, but a pound can leap the turn stiles, and dodge the tack les of those big men with their uni form caps, and jump straight in to a wait ing air port taxi. Where to, sir? West ern Civ iliza tion, my good man, and make it snap py. See how nice ly a British pound coin talks? It speaks with the voice of Queen Eliz abeth the Sec ond of Eng land. Her face is stamped up on it, and sometimes when I look very close ly I can see her lips mov ing. I hold her up to my ear. What is she say ing? Put me down this minute, young la dy, or I shall call my guards. If the Queen spoke to you in such a voice, do you sup pose it would be pos si ble to dis obey? I have read that the peo ple around hereven kings and prime min is tersthey find their bod ies re spond ing to her or ders be fore their brains can even think why not. Let me tell you, it is not the crown and the scepter that have this ef fect. Me, I could pin a tiara on my short fuzzy hair, and I could hold up a scepter in one hand, like this, and po lice of fi cers would still walk up to me in their big shoes and say, Love the en sem ble, madam, now lets have a quick look at your ID, shall we? No, it is not the Queens crown and scepter that rule in your land. It is her gram mar and her voice. That is why it is de sir able to speak the way she does. That way you can say to po lice of fi cers, in a voice as clear as the Cul li nan di amond, My good ness, how dare you? I am on ly alive at all be cause I learned the Queens En glish. Maybe you are think ing, that isnt so hard. Af ter all, En glish is the of fi cial lan guage of my coun try, Nige ria. Yes, but the trou ble is that back home we speak it so much bet ter than you. To talk the Queens En glish, I had to for get all the best tricks of my moth er tongue. For ex am ple, the Queen could nev er say, There was plen ty wa ha la, that girl done use her bot tom pow er to en gage my num ber one son and any one could see she would end in the bad bush. In stead the Queen must say, My late daugh ter-?in-?law used her fem inine charms to be come en gaged to my heir, and one might have fore seen that it wouldnt end well. It is all a lit tle sad, dont you think? Learn ing the Queens En glish is like scrub bing off the bright red var nish from your toe nails, the morn ing af ter a dance. It takes a long time and there is al ways a lit tle bit left at the end, a stain of red along the grow ing edges to re mind you of tshomind yohe good time you had. So, you can see that learn ing came slow ly to me. On the oth er hand, I had plen ty of time. I learned your lan guage in an im mi gra tion de ten tion cen ter, in Es sex, in the south east ern part of the Unit ed King dom. Two years, they locked me in there. Time was all I had. But why did I go to all the trou ble? It is be cause of what some of the old er girls ex plained to me: to sur vive, you must look good or talk even bet ter. The plain ones and the silent ones, it seems their pa per work is nev er in or der. You say, they get repa tri at ed. We say, sent home ear ly. Like your coun try is a childrens par tysome thing too won der ful to last for ev er. But the pret ty ones and the talkative ones, we are al lowed to stay. In this way your coun try be comes live ly and more beau ti ful. I will tell you what hap pened when they let me out of the im mi gra tion de ten tion cen ter. The de ten tion of fi cer put a vouch er in my hand, a trans port voucher, and he said I could tele phone for a cab. I said, Thank you sir, may God move with grace in

your life and bring joy in to your heart and prosper it up on your loved ones. The officer pointed his eyes at the ceiling, like there was something very interesting up there, and he said, Jesus. Then he pointed his finger down the corridor and he said, There is the telephone. So, I stood in the queue for the telephone. I was thinking, I went over the top with thanking that detention of officer. The Queen would merely have said, Thank you, and left it like that. Actually, the Queen would have told the detention of officer to call for the damn taxi himself, or she would have had him shot and his head separated from his body and displayed on the railings in front of the Tower of London. I was realizing, right there, that it was one thing to learn the Queens English from books and newspapers in my detention cell, and quite another thing to actually speak the language with the English. I was angry with myself. I was thinking, You cannot afford to go around making mistakes like that, girl. If you talk like a savage who learned her English on the boat, the men are going to find you out and send you straight back home. That's what I was thinking. There were three girls in the queue in front of me. They let all us girls out on the same day. It was Friday. It was a bright sunny morning in May. The corridor was dirty but it smelled clean. That is a good trick. Bleach, is how they do that. The detention of officer sat behind his desk. He was not watching us girls. He was reading a newspaper. It was spread out on his desk. It was not one of the newspapers I learned to speak your language from The Times or the Telegraph or The Guardian. No, this newspaper was not for people like you and me. There was a white girl in the newspaper photo and she was topless. You know what I mean when I say this, because it is your language we are speaking. But if I was telling this story to my big sister Nkiruka and the other girls from my village back home then I would have to stop, right here, and explain to them: topless does not mean, the lady in the newspaper did not have an upper body. It means, she was not wearing any garments on her upper body. You see the difference? Wait. Not even a brassiere? Not even a brassiere. Weh! And then I would start my story again, but those girls back home, they would whisper between them. They would giggle behind their hands. Then, just as I was getting back to my story about the morning they let me out of the immigration detention center, those girls would interrupt me again. Nkiruka would say, Listen, okay? Listen. Just so we are clear. This girl in the newspaper photo. She was a prostitute, yes? A night fighter? Did she look down at the ground from shame? No, she did not look down at the ground from shame. She looked right in the camera and smiled. What, in the newspaper? Yes. Then is it not shameful in Great Britain, to show your boobies in the newspaper? No. It is not shameful. The boys like it and there is no shame. Otherwise the topless girls would not smile like that, do you see? So do all the girls over there show them off like that? Walk around with their boobies bouncing? In the church and in the shop and in the street? No, only in the newspapers. Why do they not all show their breasts, if the men like it and there is no shame? I do not know. You lived there more than two years, little miss been-to. How come you not know? It is like that over there. Much of my life in that country was lived in such confusion. Some times I think that even the British do not know the answers to such questions. Weh!

This is what it would be like, you see, if I had to stop and explain every little thing to the girls back home. I would have to explain linoleum and bleach and soft-core pornography and the shape-changing magic of the British one-pound coin, as if all of these everyday things were very wonderful mysteries. And very quickly my own story would get lost in this great ocean of wonders because it would seem as if your country was an enchanted federation of miracles and my own story within it was really very small and unmagical. But with you it is much easier because I can say to you, look, on the morning they released us, the duty of officer at the immigration detention center was staring at a photo of a topless girl in the newspaper. And you understand the situation straightaway. That is the reason I spent two years learning the Queens English, so that you and I could speak like this without an interruption. The detention of officer, the one who was looking at the topless photo in the newspaper he was a small man and his hair was pale, like the tinned mushroom soup they served us on Tuesdays. His wrists were thin and white like electrical cables covered in plastic. His uniform was bigger than he was. The shoulders of the jacket rose up in two bumps, one on each side of his head, as if he had little animals hiding in there. I thought of those creatures blinking in the light when he took off his jacket in the evening. I was thinking, Yes sir, if I was your wife I would keep my brassiere on, thank you. And then I was thinking, Why are you staring at that girl in the newspaper, mister, and not us girls here in the queue for the telephone? What if we all ran away? But then I remembered, they were letting us out. This was hard to understand after so much time. Two years, I lived in that detention center. I was fourteen years of age when I came to your country but I did not have any pa

pers to prove it and so they put me in the same de ten tion cen ter as the adults. The trou ble was, there were men and wom en locked up to geth er in that place. At night they kept the men in a dif fer ent wing of the de ten tion cen ter. They caged them like wolves when the sun went down, but in the day time the men walked among us, and ate the same food we did. I thought they still looked hungry. I thought they watched me with ravenous eyes. So when the old er girls whis pered to me, To sur vive you must look good or talk good, I de cid ed that talk ing would be safer for me. I made my self un de sir able. I de clined to wash, and I let my skin grow oily. Un der my clothes I wound a wide strip of cot ton around my chest, to make my breasts small and flat. When the char ity box es ar rived, full of sec ond hand clothes and shoes, some of the oth er girls tried to make them selves pret ty but I rum maged through the car tons to find clothes that hid my shape. I wore loose blue jeans and a mans Hawai ian shirt and heavy black boots with the steel toe caps shin ing through the torn leather. I went to the de ten tion nurse and I made her cut my hair very short with med ical scis sors. For the whole two years I did not smile or even look in any mans face. I was ter ri fied. On ly at night, af ter they locked the men away, I went back to my de ten tion cell and I un wound the cloth from my breasts and I breathed deeply. Then I took off my heavy boots and I drew my knees up to my chin. Once a week, I sat on the foam mat tress of my bed and I paint ed my toe nails. I found the lit tle bot tle of nail var nish at the bot tom of a char ity box. It still had the price tick et on it. If I ev er dis cov er the per son who gave it then I will tell them, for the cost of one British pound and nine ty-?nine pence, they saved my life. Be cause this is what I did in that place, to re mind my self I was alive un der neath ev ery thing: un der my steel toe caps I wore bright red nail var nish. Some times when I took my boots off I screwed up my eyes against the tears and I rocked back and fro, shiv er ing from the cold. My big sis ter Nkiru ka, she be came a wom an in the grow ing sea son, un der the African sun, and who can blame her if the great red heat of it made her gid dy and flir ta tious? Who could not lean back against the door post of their house and smile with qui et in dul gence when they saw my moth er sit ting her down to say, Nkiru ka, beloved one, you must not smile at the old er boys like that? Me, I was a wom an un der white flu ores cent strip lights, in an un der ground room in an im mi gra tion de ten tion cen ter forty miles east of Lon don. There were no sea sons there. It was cold, cold, cold, and I did not have any one to smile at. Those cold years are frozen in side me. The African girl they locked up in the im mi gra tion de ten tion cen ter, poor child, she nev er re al ly es caped. In my soul she is still locked up in there, for ev er, un der the flu ores cent lights, curled up on the green linoleum floor with her knees tucked up un der her chin. And this wom an they re leased from the im mi gra tion de ten tion cen ter, this crea ture that I am, she is a new breed of hu man. There is noth ing nat ural about me. I was bornno, I was re bornin cap tiv ity. I learned my lan guage from your news pa pers, my clothes are your castoffs, and it e, offs, ais your pound that makes my pock ets ache with its ab sence. Imag ine a young wom an cut out from a smil ing Save the Chil dren mag azine ad ver tise ment, who dress es her self in thread bare pink clothes from the re cy cling bin in your lo cal su per mar ket car park and speaks En glish like the lead er col umn of The Times, if you please. I would cross the street to avoid me. Tru ly, this is the one thing that peo ple from your coun try and peo ple from my coun try agree on. They say, That refugee girl is not one of us. That girl does not be long. That girl is a halfling, a child of an un natural mat ing, an un fa mil iar face in the moon. So, I am a refugee, and I get very lone ly. Is it my fault if I do not look like an En glish girl and I do not talk like a Nige ri an? Well, who says an En glish girl must have skin as pale as the clouds that float across her sum mers? Who says a Nige ri an girl must speak in fall en En glish, as if En glish had col lid ed with Ibo, high in the up per at mo sphere, and rained down in to her mouth in a show er that half-?drowns her and leaves her chok ing up sweet tales about the bright African col ors and the taste of fried plan tain? Not like a sto ry teller, but like a vic tim res cued from the flood, cough ing up the colo nial wa ter from her lungs? Ex cuse me for learn ing your lan guage prop er ly. I am here to tell you a re al sto ry. I did not come to talk to you about the bright African col ors. I am a born-?again cit izen of the de vel op ing world, and I will prove to you that the col or of my life is gray. And if it should be that I se cret ly love fried plan tain, then that must stay be tween us and I im plore you to tell no one. Okay? The morn ing they let us out of the de ten tion cen ter, they gave us all our pos ses sions. I held mine in a see-?through plas tic bag. A Collins Gem Pock et English Dic tio nary, one pair of gray socks, one pair of gray briefs, and one Unit ed King dom Driv ers Li cense that was not mine, and one wa ter-?stained busi ness card that was not mine ei ther. If you want to know, these things be longed to a white man called An drew ORourke. I met him on a beach. This small plas tic bag is what I was hold ing in my hand when the de ten tion of fi cer told me to go and stand in the queue for the tele phone. The first girl in the queue, she was tall and she was pret ty. Her thing was beau ty, not talk ing. I won dered which of us had made the best choice to

sur vive. This girl, she had plucked her eye brows out and then she had drawn them back on again with a pen cil. This is what she had done to save her life. She was wear ing a pur ple dress, an A-line dress with pink stars and moons in the pat tern. She had a nice pink scarf wrapped around her hair, and pur ple flip-flops on her feet. I was think ing she must have been locked up a very long time in our de ten tion cen ter. One has to go through a very great num ber of the char ity box es, you will under stand, to put to geth er an out fit that is tru ly an en sem ble. On the girls brown legs there were many small white scars. I was think ing, Do those scars cov er the whole of you, like the stars and the moons on your dress? I thought that would be pret ty too, and I ask you right here please to agree with me that a scar is nev er ug ly. That is what the scar mak ers want us to think. But you and I, we must make an agree ment to de fy them. We must see all scars as beau ty. Okay? This will be our se cret. Be cause take it from me, a scar does not form on the dy ing. A scar means, I sur vived. In a few breaths time I will speak some sad words to you. But you must hear them the same way we have agreed to see scars now. Sad words are just an oth er beau ty. A Idier beau sad sto ry means, this sto ry teller is alive. The next thing you know, some thing fine will hap pen to her, some thing mar velous, and then she will turn around and smile. The girl with the pur ple A-line dress and the scars on her legs, she was al ready talk ing in to the tele phone re ceiv er. She was say ing, Hel lo, taxi? Yu come pick me up, yeh? Good. Oh, where me come? Me come from Ja maica, dar lin, you bet ter be lieve that. Huh? What? Oh, where me come right now? Okay wait please. She put her hand to cov er the tele phone re ceiv er. She turned around to the sec ond girl in the queue and she said, Lis ten dar lin, what name is dis place, where we at right now? But the sec ond girl just looked up at her and shrugged her shoul ders. The sec ond girl was thin and her skin was dark brown and her eyes were green like a jel ly sweet when you suck the out side sug ar off and hold it up against the moon. She was so pret ty, I can not even ex plain. She was wear ing a yel low sari dress. She was hold ing a see-through plas tic bag like mine, but there was noth ing in it. At first I thought it was emp ty but then I thought, Why do you car ry that bag, girl, if there is noth ing in it? I could see her sari through it, so I de cid ed she was hold ing a bag full of lemon yel low. That is ev erything she owned when they let us girls out. I knew that sec ond girl a bit. I was in the same room as her for two weeks one time, but I nev er talked with her. She did not speak one word of anyones En glish. That is why she just shrugged and held on tight to her bag of lemon yel low. So the girl on the phone, she point ed her eyes up at the ceil ing, the same way the de ten tion of fi cer at his desk did. Then the girl on the phone turned to the third girl in the queue and she said to her, Do yu know the name of dis place where we is at? But the third girl did not know ei ther. She just stood there, and she was wear ing a blue T-shirt and blue den im jeans and white Dun lop Green Flash train ers, and she just looked down at her own see-through bag, and her bag was full of let ters and doc uments. There was so much pa per in that bag, all crum pled and creased, she had to hold one hand un der the bag to stop it all burst ing out. Now, this third girl, I knew her a lit tle bit too. She was not pret ty and she was not a good talk er ei ther, but there is one more thing that can save you from be ing sent home ear ly. This girls thing was, she had her sto ry all writ ten down and made of fi cial. There were rub ber stamps at the end of her sto ry that said in red ink this is TRUE. I re mem ber she told me her sto ry once and it went some thing like, the-men-came-and-they- burned-my-vil lage- tied-my-girls- raped-my-girls- took-my-girls- whipped-my-hus band- cut-my-breast- I-ran-away- through-the-bush- found-a-ship- crossed-the-sea and-then-they-put-me-in-here. Or some such sto ry like that. I got con fused with all the sto ries in that de ten tion cen ter. All the girls sto ries start ed out, the-men-came-and-they. And all of the sto ries fin ished, and-then-they-put-me-in-here. All the sto ries were sad, but you and I have made our agree ment con cern ing sad words. With this girlgirl three in the queueher sto ry had made her so sad that she did not know the name of the place where she was at and she did not want to know. The girl was not even cu ri ous. So the girl with the tele phone re ceiv er, she asked her again. What? she said. Yu no talk nei ther? How come yu not know the name dis place we at? Then the third girl in the queue, she just point ed her eyes up at the ceil ing, and so the girl with the tele phone re ceiv er point ed her own eyes up at the ceiling for a sec ond time. I was think ing, Okay, now the de ten tion of fi cer has looked at the ceil ing one time and girl three has looked at the ceil ing one time and girl one has looked at the ceil ing two times, so maybe there are some an swers up on that ceil ing af ter all. Maybe there is some thing very cheer ful up there. Maybe there are sto ries writ ten on the ceil ing that go some thing like the-men-came-and-they- brought-us-col or ful-dress es-fetched-wood-for-the-fire- told-some-crazy-jokes- drank-beer-with-us- chased-us-till-we-gig gled- stopped-the-mosquitoes-from-bit ing- told-us-the-trick-for-catch ing-the-British-one-pound-coin- turned-the-moon-in to-cheese- Oh, and then they put me in here. I

looked at the ceil ing, but it was on ly white paint and flu ores cent light tubes up there. The girl on the tele phone, she fi nal ly looked at me. So I said to her, The name of this place is the Black Hill Im mi gra tion Re moval Cen tre. The girl stared at me. Yu kid din wid me, she said. What kine of a name is dat? So I point ed at the lit tle met al plate that was screwed on the wall above the tele phone. The girl looked at it and then she looked back to me and she said, Sor ry dar lin, I can not ridd it. So I read it out to her, and I point ed to the words one at a time. BLACK HILL IM MI GRA TION RE MOVAL CEN TRE, HIGH EAST ER, CHELMS FORD, ES SEX. Thank you pre cious, the first girl said, and she lift ed up the tele phone re ceiv er. She said in to the re ceiv er: All right now lis ten mis ter, the place I is right now is called Black Hill Im mi gra tion Re moval. Then she said, No, please, wait. Wait. Then she looked sad and she put the tele phone re ceiv er back down on the tele phone. I said, What is wrong? The first girl sighed and she said, Taxi man say he no pick up from dis place. Then he say, You peo ple are scum. You know dis word? I said no, be cause I did not know for sure, so I took my Collins Gem Pock et En glish Dic tio nary out of my see-?through bag and I looked up the word. I said to the first girl, You are a film of im pu ri ties or veg eta tion that can form on the sur face of a liq uid. She looked at me and I looked at her and we gig gled be cause we did not un der stand what to do with the in for ma tion. This was al ways my trou ble when I was learn ing to speak your lan guage. Ev ery word can de fend it self. Just when you go to grab it, it can split in to two sep arate mean ings so the un der stand ing clos es on emp ty air. I ad mire you peo ple. You are like sor cer ers and you have made your lan guage as safe as your mon ey. So me and the first girl in the tele phone queue, we were gig gling at each oth er, and I was hold ing my see-?through bag and she was hold ing her see-?through bag. There was one black eye brow pen cil and one pair of twee z ers and three rings of dried pineap ple in hers. The first girl saw me look ing at her bag and she stopped gig gling. What you starin at? she said. I said I did not know. She said, I know what you tin king. You tin king, Now the taxi no come for to pick me up, how far me go ing to get wid one eye brow pen cil an one twee z er an three pineap ple slice? So I told her, Maybe you can use the eye brow pen cil to write a mes sage that says HELP ME, and then you can give the pineap ple slices to the first per son who does. The girl looked at me like I was crazy in the head and she said to me: Okay dar lin, one, I got no pa per for to write no mes sage on, two, I no know how to write, I on ly know how to draw on me eyebrows, an tree, me in tend to eat that pineap ple me self. And she made her eyes wide and stared at me. While this was hap pen ing, the sec ond girl in the queue, the girl with the lemon-?yel low sari and the see-?through bag full of yel low, she had be come the first girl in the queue, be cause now she held the tele phone re ceiv er in her own hand. She was whis per ing in to it in some lan guage that sound ed like but ter flies drown ing in hon ey. I tapped the girl on her shoul der, and pulled at her sari, and I said to her: Please, you must try to talk to them in En glish. The sari girl looked at me, and she stopped talk ing in her but ter fly lan guage. Very slow ly and care ful ly, like she was re mem ber ing the words from a dream, she said in to the tele phone re ceiv er: ENG LAND, YES PLEASE. YES PLEASE THANK YOU, I WANT GO TO ENG LAND. So the girl in the pur ple A-?line dress, she put her nose right up to the nose of the girl in the lemon-?yel low sari, and she tapped her fin ger on the girls forehead and made a sound with her mouth like a broom han dle hit ting an emp ty bar rel. Bong! Bong! she said to the girl. You al ready is in Eng land, get it? And she point ed both her in dex fin gers down at the linoleum floor. She said: Dis is Eng land, dar lin, ya nuh see it? Right here, yeh? Dis where we at all-?red dy. The girl in the yel low sari went qui et. She just stared back with those green eyes like jel ly moons. So the girl in the pur ple dress, the Ja maican girl, she said, Here, gimme dat, and she grabbed the tele phone re ceiv er out of the sari girls hand. And she lift ed the re ceiv er to her mouth and she said Lis ten, wait, one min nit please. But then she went qui et and she passed the tele phone re ceiv er to me and I lis ten he and I ed, and it was just the di al tone. So I turned to the sari girl. You have to di al a num ber first, I said. You un der stand? Di al num ber first, then tell taxi man where you want to go. Okay? But the girl in the sari, she just nar rowed her eyes at me, and pulled her see-?through bag of lemon yel low a lit tle clos er to her, like maybe I was go ing to take that away from her the way the oth er girl had tak en the tele phone re ceiv er. The girl in the pur ple dress, she sighed and turned to me. It aint no good dar lin, she said. De Lord gonna call his chillen home fore dis one calls for a taxi. And she passed the tele phone re ceiv er to me. Here, she said. Yu bet ta try one time. I point ed to the third girl in the queue, the one with the bag of doc uments and the blue T-?shirt and the Dun lop Green Flash train ers. What about her? I said. This girl is be fore me in the queue. Yeh, said the girl in the pur ple dress, but dis ooman aint got no mo-?tee-?VAY-?shun. Aint dat right dar lin? And she stared at the girl with the doc uments, but the girl with the doc uments just shrugged and looked down at her Dun lop Green Flash shoes. Aint dat de truth, said the girl in the pur ple dress, and she turned back to me. Its up to yu,

dar lin. Yu got to talk us out a here, fore dey change dey mind an lock us all back up. I looked down at the tele phone re ceiv er and it was gray and dirty and I was afraid. I looked back at the girl in the pur ple dress. Where do you want to go? I said. And she said, Any ends. Ex cuse me? Any where, dar lin. I di aled the taxi num ber that was writ ten on the phone. A mans voice came on. He sound ed tired. Cab ser vice, he said. The way he said it, it was like he was do ing me a big fa vor just by say ing those words. Good morn ing, I would like a taxi please. You want a cab? Yes. Please. A taxi cab. For four pas sen gers. Where from? From the Black Hill Im mi gra tion Re moval Cen tre, please. In High East er. It is near Chelms ford. I know where it is. Now you lis ten to me Please, it is okay. I know you do not pick up refugees. We are not refugees. We are clean ers. We work in this place. Youre clean ers. Yes. And thats the truth is it? Be cause if I had a pound for ev ery bloody im mi grant that got in the back of one of my cabs and didnt know where they wanted to go and start ed prat tling on to my driv er in Swahili and tried to pay him in cigarettes, Id be play ing golf at this very mo ment in stead of talk ing to you. We are clean ers. All right. Its true you dont talk like one of them. Where do you want to go? I had mem orized the ad dress on the Unit ed King dom Driv ers Li cense in my see-?through plas tic bag. An drew ORourke, the white man I met on the beach: he lived in Kingston-?up on-?Thames in theuo;Thames En glish coun ty of Sur rey. I spoke in to the tele phone. Kingston, please. The girl in the pur ple dress grabbed my arm and hissed at me. No dar lin! she said. Any where but Ja maica. Dey mens be killin me de min nit I ketch dere, kill me dead. I did not un der stand why she was scared, but I know now. There is a Kingston in Eng land but there is al so a Kingston in Ja maica, where the cli mate is dif fer ent. This is an oth er great work you sor cer ers have doneeven your cities have two tails. Kingston? said the man on the tele phone. Kingston-?up on-?Thames, I said. Thats bloody miles away isnt it? Thats over in, what? Sur rey, I said. Sur rey. You are four clean ers from leafy Sur rey, is that what youre try ing to tell me? No. We are clean ers from near by. But they are send ing us on a clean ing job in Sur rey. Cash or ac count then? The man sound ed so tired. What? Will you pay in cash, or is it go ing on the de ten tion cen ters bill? We will pay in cash, mis ter. We will pay when we get there. Youd bet ter. I lis tened for a minute and then I pressed my hand down on the cra dle of the tele phone re ceiv er. I di aled an oth er num ber. This was the tele phone num ber from the busi ness card I car ried in my see-?through plas tic bag. The busi ness card was dam aged by wa ter. I could not tell if the last num ber was an 8 or a 3. I tried an 8, be cause in my coun try odd num bers bring bad luck, and that is one thing I had al ready had enough of. A man an swered the call. He was an gry. Who is this? Its bloody six in the morn ing. Is this Mis ter An drew ORourke? Yeah. Who are you? Can I come to see you, Mis ter? Who the hell is this? We met on the beach in Nige ria. I re mem ber you very well, Mis ter ORourke. I am in Eng land now. Can I come to see you and Sarah? I do not have any where else to go. There was si lence on the oth er end of the line. Then the man coughed, and start ed to laugh. This is a windup, right? Who is this? Im warn ing you, I get nut ters like you on my case all the time. Leave me alone, or you wont get away with it. My pa per al ways pros ecutes. Theyll have this call traced and find out who you are and have you ar rest ed. You wouldnt be the first. You dont be lieve it is me? Just leave me alone. Un der stand? I dont want to hear about it. All that stuff hap pened a long time agoad long ti and it wasnt my fault. I will come to your house. That way you will be lieve it is me. No. I do not know any one else in this coun try, Mis ter ORourke. I am sor ry. I am just telling you, so that you can be ready. The man did not sound an gry any more. He made a small sound, like a child when it is ner vous about what will hap pen. I hung up the phone and turned around to the oth er girls. My heart was pound ing so fast, I thought I would vom it right there on the linoleum floor. The oth er girls were star ing at me, ner vous and ex pec tant. Well? said the girl in the pur ple dress. Hmm? I said. De taxi, dar lin! What is hap penin about de taxi? Oh yes, the taxi. The taxi man said a cab will pick us up in ten min utes. He said we are to wait out side. The girl in the pur ple dress, she smiled. Mi name is Yevette. From Ja maica, zeen. You use ful, dar lin. What dey call yu? My name is Lit tle Bee. What kin da name yu call dat? It is my name. What kind of place yu come from, dey go roun call in lit tle gals de names of in sects? Nige ria. Yevette laughed. It was a big laugh, like the way the chief bad dy laughs in the pi rate films. WU-?ha-?ha-?ha-?ha! It made the tele phone re ceiv er rat tle in its cra dle. Nye-?JIR RYA! said Yevette. Then she turned round to the oth ers, the girl in the sari and the girl with the doc uments. Come wid us, gals, she said. We de Unit ed Na tions, see it, an to day we is all fol lowin Nye-?JIR RYA. WU-?ha-?ha-?ha-?ha! Yevette was still laugh ing when the four of us girls walked out past the se cu ri ty desk, to ward the door. The de ten tion of fi cer looked up from his news paper when we went by. The top less girl was gone nowthe of fi cer had turned the page. I looked down at his news pa per. The head line on the new page said ASY LUM SEEK ERS EAT ING OUR SWANS. I looked back at the de ten tion of fi cer, but he

would not look up at me. While I looked, he moved his arm over the page to cover the head line. He made it look like he needed to scratch his elbow. Or maybe he really did need to scratch his elbow. I realized I knew nothing about men apart from the fear. A uniform that is too big for you, a desk that is too small for you, an eight-hour shift that is too long for you, and suddenly here comes a girl with three kilos of documents and no motivation, another one with jelly-green eyes and a yellow sari who is so beautiful you can not look at her for too long in case your eye balls go ploom, a third girl from Nigeria who is named after a honey bee, and a noisy woman from Jamaica who laughs like the pirate Blue beard. Perhaps this is exactly the type of circumstance that makes a mans elbow itch. I turned to look back at the detention of fier just before we went out through the double doors. He was watching us leave. He looked very small and lonely there, we sneily thith his thin little wrists, under the fluorescent lights. The light made his skin look green, the color of a baby caterpillar just out of the egg. The early-morning sunshine was shining in through the door glass. The officer screwed up his eyes against the daylight. I suppose we were just silhouettes to him. He opened his mouth, like he was going to say something, but he stopped. What? I said. I realized he was going to tell us there had been a mistake. I wondered if we should run. I did not want to go back in detention. I wondered how far we would get if we ran. I wondered if they would come after us with dogs. The detention of fier stood up. I heard his chair scrape on the linoleum floor. He stood there with his hands at his sides. Ladies? he said. Yes? He looked down at the ground, and then up again. Best of luck, he said. And we girls turned around and walked toward the light. I pushed open the double doors, and then I froze. It was the sunlight that stopped me. I felt so fragile from the detention center, I was afraid those bright rays of sunshine could snap me in half. I couldn't take that first step outside. What is the holdup, Lil Bee? Yvette was standing behind me. I was blocking the door for every one. One moment, please. Outside, the fresh air smelled of wet grass. It blew in my face. The smell made me panic. For two years I had smelled only bleach, and my nail varnish, and the other detainees cigarettes. Nothing natural. Nothing like this. I felt that if I took one step forward, the earth itself would rise up and reject me. There was nothing natural about me now. I stood there in my heavy boots with my breasts strapped down, neither a woman nor a girl, a creature who had forgotten her language and learned yours, whose past had crumbled to dust. What the hell are you waiting for, darling? I am scared, Yvette. Yvette shook her head and she smiled. Maybe your right to be scared, Lil Bee, because you are a smart girl. Maybe me just too dumb to be afraid. But we spend eighteen months locked up in that place, and if you think me dumb enough to wait one second longer on account of your trembling and your quaking, you better think twice. I turned round to face her and I gripped on to the door frame. I can't move, I said. That is when Yvette gave me a great push in the chest and I flew backward. And that is how it was, the first time I touched the soil of England as a free woman, it was not with the soles of my boots but with the seat of my trousers. WU-ha-ha-ha! said Yvette. Welcome in the United Kingdom, isn't that glorious? When I got my breath back I started laughing too. I sat on the ground, with the warm sun shining on my back, and I realized that the earth had not rejected me and the sunlight had not snapped me in two. I stood up and I smiled at Yvette. We all took a few steps away from the detention center buildings. As we walked, when the other girls were not looking, I reached under my Hawaiian shirt and I undid the band of cotton that held my breasts strapped down. I unwound it and threw it on the ground and ground it in to the dirt with the heel of my boot. I breathed deeply in the fresh, clean air. When we came to the main gate, the four of us girls stopped...

two FROM THE SPRING OF 2007 until the end of that long summer when Little Bee came to live with us, my son removed his Batman costume only at bath times. I ordered a twin costume that I substituted while he splashed in the suds, so that at least I could wash the boy sweat and the grass stains out of the first. It was a dirty, green-knead job, fighting master criminals. If it wasn't Mr. Freeze with his das tardy ice ray, then it was the Penguin Batman's deadly foe or the even more sinister Puffin, whose absolute wickedness the original creators of the Batman franchise had inexplicably failed to chronicle. My son and I lived with the consequences a house full of acolytes, henchmen and stooges, ogling us from behind the sofa, cackling darkly in the thin gap beside the book case, and generally bursting out at us willy-nilly. It was one shock after another, in fact. At four years old, asleep and awake, my son lived at constant readiness. There was no question of separating him from the demonic bat mask, the Lycra suit, the glossy yellow utility belt and the jet-black cape. And there was no use addressing my son by his Christian name. He would only look behind him, cock his head, and shrug as if to say, My bat senses can detect no boy of that name here, madam. The only name my son answered to, that summer, was Batman. Nor was there any point explaining

ing to him that his fa ther had died. My son didnt be lieve in the phys ical pos si bil ity of death. Death was some thing that could on ly oc cur if the evil schemes of the bad dies were not constant ly foiledand that, of course, was un think able. That sum merthe sum mer my hus band diedwe all had iden ti ties we were loath to let go of. My son had his Bat man cos tume, I still used my hus bands sur name, and Lit tle Bee, though she was rel ative ly safe with us, still clung to the name she had tak en in a time of ter ror. We were ex iles from re al ity, that summer. We were refugees from our selves. To flee from cru el ty is the most nat ural thing in the world, of course. And the tim ing that brought us to geth er that sum mer was so very cru el. Lit tle Bee tele phoned us on the morn ing they re leased her from the de ten tion cen ter. My hus band picked up her call. I on ly found out much lat er that it was herAndrew nev er told me. Ap par ent ly she let him know she was com ing, but I dont sup pose he felt up to see ing her face again. Five days lat er he killed him self by hang ing. They found my hus band with his feet tread ing emp ty air, touch ing the soil of no coun try. Death, of course, is a refuge. Its where you go when a new name, or a mask and cape, can no longer hide you from your self. Its where you run to when none of an the prin ci pal ities of your con science will grant you asy lum. Lit tle Bee knocked on my front door five days af ter my hus band died, which was ten days af ter they re leased her from de ten tion. Af ter a jour ney of five thou sand miles and two years, she ar rived just too late to find An drew alive, but just in time for his fu ner al. Hel lo Sarah, she said. Lit tle Bee ar rived at eight A. M. And the un der tak er knocked at ten. Not one sec ond to, or one sec ond past. I imag ine the un der tak er had been silent ly stand ing out side our front door for sev er al min utes, look ing at his watch, wait ing for our lives to con verge on to the pre cise fault line at which our past could be cleaved from our fu ture with three soft strikes of the bright brass knock er. My son opened the door, and took in the un der tak ers height, his im pec ca ble tai lor ing, and his sober de meanor. I sup pose the un der tak er looked for all the world like Bat mans worka day al ter ego. My son shout ed along the hall way to me: Mum my, its Bruce Wayne! That morn ing I walked out on to the street and I stood there, look ing at An drews cof fin through the thick, slight ly green ish glass of the hearse win dow. When Lit tle Bee came out to join me, bring ing Bat man by the hand, the un der tak er ushered us to a long, black limou sine and nod ded us in. I told him wed rather walk. We looked as if wed been cob bled to geth er in Pho to shop, the three of us, walk ing to my hus bands fu ner al. One white mid dle-class moth er, one skin ny black refugee girl, and one small Dark Knight from Gotham City. It seemed as if wed been cut-and-past ed. My thoughts raced, night mar ish and dis con nected. It was on ly a few hun dred yards to the church, and the three of us walked in the road ahead of the hearse while an an gry queue of traf fic built up be hind. I felt aw ful about that. I was wear ing a dark gray skirt and jack et with gloves and char coal stock ings. Lit tle Bee was wear ing my smart black rain coat over the clothes they let her out of the de ten tion cen ter ina mor ti fy ing ly un fu ne re al Hawai ian shirt and blue jeans. My son was wear ing an ex pres sion of ab so lute joy. He, Bat man, had stopped the traf fic. His cape swirled in his tiny slip stream as he strode proud ly ahead, his grin stretch ing from bat ear to bat ear be neath the dark ness of his mask. Oc ca sion al ly his su pe ri or vi sion would de tect an en emy that need ed smit ing, and when this oc curred my son would sim ply stop, smite, and con tinue. He was wor ried that the Puf fins in vis ible hordes might at tack me. I was wor ried that my son hadnt done a wee be fore we left the house, and might there fore do it in his bat pants. I was al so wor ried about be ing a wid ow for the rest of my life. At first Id thought it was quite brave of me to in sist on walk ing to the church, but now I felt dizzy and fool ish. I thought I might faint. Lit tle Bee held on to my el bow and whis pered to me to take deep breaths. I re mem ber think ing, How strange, that it should be you who is keep ing me on my feet. In the church I sat in the front pew, with Lit tle Bee on my left and Bat man on my right. The church was stuffed with mourn ers, of course. No one from workI tried to keep my life and my mag a zine sep aratebut oth er wise ev ery body An drew and I knew was there. It was dis ori en tat ing, like hav ing the entire con tents of ones ad dress book dressed in black and ex port ed in to pews in non al pha bet ical or der. They had clas si fied them selvesueued them ac cord ing to some un writ ten pro to col of grief, blood rel atives ghoul ish ly close to the cof fin, old girl friends in a re luc tant clus ter near the bap tismal font. I couldnt bear to look be hind me and see this new nat ural or der of things. It was all very much too sud den. A week ago I had been a suc cess ful work ing moth er. Now I was sit ting at my hus bands fu ner al, flanked by a su per hero and a Nige ri an refugee. It seemed like a dream that might be awo ken from with rel ative ly lit tle ef fort. I stared at my hus bands cof fin, strewn with white lilies. Bat man stared at the vicar. He cast an ap prov ing eye over the vicars stole and sur plice. He gave the vicar a solemn thumbs-up, one caped cru sad er to an oth er. The vicar re turned the salute, then his thumb re turned to the fad ed gilt edg ing of his Bible. The church was falling qui et; ex pec tant. My son looked all around, then back at me. Wheres



Dad dy? he said. I squeezed my sons hot, sweaty hand, and lis tened to the coughs and snif fles echo ing round the church. I won dered how I could pos si bly ex plain my hus bands death to his son. It was de pres sion that killed An drew, of course de pres sion and guilt. But my son didnt be lieve in death, let alone in the ca pa city of mere emo tions to cause it. Mr. Freezes ice rays, per haps. The Puf fins lethal wingspan, at a stretch. But an or di nary phone call, from a skin ny African girl? It was im pos si ble to ex plain. I re al ized I would have to tell my son the whole sto ry, some day. I won dered where I would be gin. It was two years be fore, in the sum mer of 2005, that An drew had be gun his long, slow slide in to the de pres sion that fi nal ly claimed him. It start ed on the day we first met Lit tle Bee, on a lone ly beach in Nige ria. The on ly sou venir I have of that first meet ing is an ab sence where the mid dle fin ger of my left hand used to be. The am pu ta tion is quite clean. In place of my fin ger is a stump, a phan tom dig it that used to be re spon si ble for the E, D, and C keys on my lap top. I cant re ly on E, D, and C any more. They go miss ing when I need them most. Pleased be comes please. Ec stasies be comes sta sis. I miss my fin ger most on dead line days, when the copy check ers have all gone home and Im typ ing up the last-?minute ad di tions to my mag a zine. We pub lished an ed ito ri al once where I said I was wary of sen si tive men. I meant to say weary, of course, and af ter a hun dred out raged let ters from the earnest boyfriends whod hap pened to glance at my piece on their part ners cof fee ta ble (pre sum ably in be tween giv ing a back rub and wash ing the dish es), I be gan to re al ize just how weary I was. It was a ty po graph ical ac ci dent, I told them. I didnt add, it was the kind of ty po graph ical ac ci dent that is caused by a steel ma chete on a Nige ri an beach. I mean, what does one call the type of meet ing where one gains an African girl and los es E, D, and C? I do not think you have a word for it in your lan guagethats what Lit tle Bee would say. I sat in my pew, mas saged the stump of my fin ger, and found my self ac knowl edg ing for the first time that my hus band had been doomed since the day we met Lit tle Bee. The in ter ven ing two years had brought a se ries of wors en ing pre mo ni tions, cul mi nat ing in the hor ri ble morn ing ten days ear li er when I had woken up to the sound of the tele phone ring ing. My whole body had crawled with dread. It had been an or di nary week day morn ing. The June is sue of my magazine was al most ready to go to the print ers, and An draws col ume frsquo;sn for The Times was due in too. Just a nor mal morn ing, but the soft hairs on the backs of my arms were up. I have nev er been one of those hap py wom en who in sist that dis as ter strikes from a clear blue sky. For me there were count less fore tellings, in nu mer able small breaks with nor mal cy. An draws chin un shaved, a sec ond bot tle un corked on a week day night, the use of the pas sive voice on dead line Fri day. Cer tain at ti tudes which have been adopt ed by this so ci ety have left this com men ta tor a lit tle lost. That was the very last sen tence my hus band wrote. In his Times column, he was al ways so pre cise with the writ ten word. From a layper son, lost would be a syn onym for be wil dered. From my hus band, it was a mea sured good-?bye. It was cold in the church. I lis tened to the vicar say ing where, o death, is thy sting? I stared at the lilies and smelled the sweet ac cu sa tion of them. God, how I wish I had paid more at ten tion to An drew. How to ex plain to my son that the warn ing signs were so slight? That dis as ter, when it is quite sure of its own strength, will an nounce it self by hard ly moving its lips? They say that in the hour be fore an earth quake the clouds hang lead en in the sky, the wind slows to a hot breath, and the birds fall qui et in the trees of the town square. Yes, but these are the same por tents that pre cede lunchtime, frankly. If we over re act ed ev ery time the wind eased up, we would for ev er be lay ing down un der the din ing-?room ta ble when we re ally should be lay ing the plates on top of it. Would my son ac cept that this is how it was with his fa ther? The hairs on my arms went up, Bat man, but I had a house hold to run. I nev er un der stood that he was ac tu al ly go ing to do it. All I would hon est ly be able to say is that I woke up with the phone ring ing and my body pre dict ing some event that had yet to hap pen, al though I nev er imag ined it would be so se ri ous. Char lie had still been asleep. An drew picked up the phone in his study, quick ly, be fore the noise of the ring ing could wake our son. An draws voice became ag itat ed. I heard it quite clear ly from the bed room. Just leave me alone, he said. All that stuff hap pened a long time ago and it wasnt my fault. The trou ble was, my hus band didnt re ally be lieve that. I found him in tears. I asked him who it had been on the phone, but he wouldnt say. And then, since we were both awake and Char lie was still asleep, we made love. I used to do that with An drew some times. More for him than for me, re ally. By that stage of our mar riage it had be come a main te nance thing, like bleed ing the air out of the ra di atorsjust an oth er part of run ning a house hold. I didnt knowin fact I still dont knowwhat aw ful con se quences are sup posed to en sue if one fails to bleed the ra di ators. Its not some thing a cau tious wom an would ev er al low her self to dis cov er. We didnt speak a word. I took An drew in to the bed room and we lay on the bed be neath the tall Geor gian win dows with the yel low silk blinds. The blinds were em broi dered with pale fo

liage. Silk birds hid there in a kind of silent ap pre hen sion. It was a bright May morn ing in Kingston-up on-Thames, but the sun light through the blinds was a dark and florid saf fron. It was fever ish, al most malar ial. The bed room walls were yel low and ocher. Across the creak ing land ing, An drews study was whitethe col or, I sup pose, of blank pages. Thats where thasquo;s I re trieved him, af ter the aw ful phone call. I read a few words of his col umn, over his shoul der. Hed been awake all night writ ing an opin ion piece about the Mid dle East, which was a re gion he had nev er vis it ed and had no spe cial ist knowl edge of. It was the sum mer of 2007, and my son was fight ing the Pen guin and the Puf fin, and my coun try was fight ing Iraq and Afghanistan, and my hus band was form ing pub lic opin ion. It was the kind of sum mer where no one took their cos tume off. I pulled my hus band away from the phone. I pulled him in to the bed room by the tas seled cord of his dress ing gown, be cause I had read some where that this sort of be hav ior would ex cite him. I pulled him down on to our bed. I re mem ber the way he moved in side me, like a clock with its main spring run ning down. I pulled his face close to mine and I whis pered, Oh god An drew, are you all right? My hus band didnt re ply. He just closed his eyes against the tears and we be gan to move faster while small, in vol untary moans came from our mouths and fled in to the oth ers moan ing in word less des per ation. In on this small tragedy walked my son, who was more at home fight ing evil on a larg er, more knock about scale. I opened my eyes and saw him stand ing in the bed room door way, watch ing us through the small, di amond-shaped eye holes of his bat mask. From the ex pres sion on the part of his face that could be seen, he seemed to be won der ing which (if any) of the gad gets on his util ity belt might help in this sit ua tion. When I saw my son, I pushed An drew off me and scrab bled fran ti cal ly for the du vet to cov er us. I said, Oh god Char lie, Im so sor ry. My son looked be hind him, then back at me. Char lie isnt here. Im Bat man. I nod ded, and bit my lip. Good morn ing, Bat man. What is you and Dad dy do ing, Mum my? Er Is you get ting bad dies? Are we get ting bad dies, Char lie. Not is we. Are you? Yes, Bat man. Yes, thats ex act ly what were do ing. I smiled at my son, and wait ed. I won dered what Bat man would say. What he said was, Some one done a poo in my cos tume, Mum my. Did a poo, Char lie. Yes. A big big poo. Oh Bat man. Have you re al ly done a poo in your suit? Bat man shook his head. His bat ears quiv ered. Be neath the mask an ex pres sion of great cun ning set tled up on the vis ible part of his face. It wasnt me that done the poo. It was the Puf fin. (The ital ics were his. ) Are you telling me that the Puf fin came in the night and did a poo in your bat suit? Bat man nod ded, solemn ly. I no ticed he had kept his bat ip. Kept hi mask on but tak en off his bat suit. He stood naked ex cept for the mask and cape. He held up the bat suit for me to in spect. A lump of some thing fell from it and thumped on the car pet. The smell was in de scrib able. I sat up in bed and saw a trail of lumps lead ing across the car pet from the bed room door. Some where in side me the girl who had done sci ence A-lev els not ed, with em pir ical fas ci na tion, that feces had al so found their way in to lo ca tions which in clud edbut were not lim it ed toBat mans hands, the door frame, the bed room wall, my alarm-clock ra dio and, of course, the bat suit. My sons shit was ev ery where. There was shit on his hands. Shit on his face. Even on the black-and-yel low bat symbol of his bat suit there was shit. I tried, but I couldnt make my self be lieve that these were Puf fin drop pings. This was bat shit. Dis tant ly, I re mem bered some thing Id read on the par ent ing page. Its all right, Bat man. Mum mys not cross. Mum my clean the poo up. Um. Er. Je sus. Grave ly, Bat man shook his head. No, not Je sus. Mum my. Re sent ful ness was start ing to over come the em bar rass ment and guilt. I looked across to where An drew lay with his eyes tight closed and his hands twisted at the exquisite aw ful ness of his clin ical de pres sion, our un hap py sex in ter rupt ed, and this very thick stink of shit. Bat man, why dont you ask Dad dy to clean you up? My son looked across at his fa ther for a long time, then turned back to me. Pa tient ly, as if ex plain ing some thing to an im be cile, he shook his lit tle head again. But why not? (I was plead ing now. ) Why not ask Dad dy? Bat man looked solemn. Dad dy is fight ing bad dies, he said. The gram mar was ir re proach able. I looked across at his fa ther with him, and I sighed. Yes, I said, I sup pose youre right. Five days lat er, on the last morn ing I saw my hus band alive, I fin ished dress ing my caped cru sad er, I break fast ed him, and I ran him down to his nurserys Ear ly Birds Club. Back at the house, I show ered. An drew watched me as I pulled on my tights. I al ways dressed up for dead line days. Heels, skirt, smart green jack et. Mag azine pub lish ing has its rhythms and if the ed itor wont dance to them, she cant ex pect her staff to. I dont float fea ture ideas in Fen di heels, and I dont close an is sue in Pumas. So I dressed against the clock while An drew lay naked on the bed and watched me. He didnt say a word. The last glimpse I had of him, be fore I closed the bed room door, he was still watch ing. How to de scribe, to my son, his fa thers last seen ex pres sion? I de cid ed I would tell my son that his fa ther had looked very peace ful. I de cid ed I wouldnt tell him that my hus band opened his mouth to say some thing, but that I

was running late and turned away. I arrived at the office around 9:30. The magazine was based in Spitalfields, on Commercial Street, ninety minutes by public transport from Kingston-upon-Thames. The worst moment comes when you leave the overland network and descend into the heat of the Underground. There were two hundred of us packed in to each tube carriage. We listened to the screech of the metal wheels > < metal on the track, with our bodies pinned and immobile. For three stops I stood pressed against a thin man in a corduroy jacket who was quietly weeping. One would normally avert one's eyes, but my head was pinned in such a position that I could only look. I should have liked to put an arm around the man. But my arms were jammed by the commuters on each side of me. Besides, I wasn't sure I was up to administering tenderness like that, on a crowded train, under the silent gaze of others. I was torn between two kinds of shame. On the one hand, the disgrace of not discharging a human obligation. On the other hand, the madness of being the first in the crowd to move. I smiled helplessly at the weeping man and I couldn't stop thinking about Andrew. As soon as one emerges above ground, of course, one can quickly forget our human obligations. London is a beautiful machine for doing that. The city was bright, fresh and inviting that morning. I was excited about closing the June issue, and I practically ran the last two minutes to the office. On the outside of our building was the magazine's name, NIXIE, in three-foot-high pink neon letters. I stood outside for a moment, taking a few deep breaths. The air was still, and you could hear the neon crackling over the rumble of the traffic. I stood with my hand on the door and wondered what Andrew had been about to say, just before I left home. My husband hadn't always been lost for words. The long silences only began on the day we met Little Bee. Before that, he wouldn't pipe down for a minute. On our honeymoon we talked and talked. We stayed in a beachfront villa, and we drank rum and lemonade and talked so much that I never even noticed what color the sea was. Whenever I need to stop and remind myself how much I once loved Andrew, I only need to think about this. That the ocean covers seven tenths of the earth's surface, and yet my husband could make me not notice it. That is how big he was for me. When we got back to our new married house in Kingston, I asked Andrew about the color of that honeymoon sea. He said, Yeah, was it blue? I said, come on Andrew, you're a pro, you can do better than that. And Andrew said, Okay then, the awesome ocean fastness was a splendor of ultramarine crested with crimson and gold where the burnished sun blazed on the wave tops and sent them crashing in to the gloomy troughs deepening to a dark malevolent indigo. He hung on the penultimate syllable, deepening his voice in comic pomposity even as he raised his eyebrows. INN-di go, he boomed. Of course you know why I didn't notice the sea? It was because I spent two weeks with my head Well, where my husband's head was is between me and him. We both giggled helplessly and rolled around on the bed and Charlie, dear Charlie, was conceived. I pushed open the street door and stepped up into the lobby of the magazine. The black Italian marble floor was the only grace note that had survived our tenancy of the offices. The rest of the lobby was pure us. Boxes of sample frocks from wannabe fashion houses were stacked up along one wall. Some intern had triaged them with a chunky blue marker: YES KEEP FOR SHOOT, or OH I THINK NOT, or the triumphant lyabso-lutist THIS IS NOT FASHION. A dead Japanese juniper tree stood in a cracked gold Otagiri vase. Three glittering Christmas baubles still hung from it. The wall covered it. These were done up in fuchsia and fairy lights, and even in the dim sun shine from the tinted windows that gave on to Commercial Street, the paint-work looked marked and tacky. I cultivated this unkempt look. Nixie wasn't supposed to be like the other women's magazines. Let them keep their spotless lobbies and their smug Eames chairs. When it comes right down to editorial choices, I would rather have a bright staff and a dim lobby. Clarissa, my features editor, came through the doors just after me. We kissed once, twice, three times we'd been friends since school and she hooked her arm around mine as we took the stairs together. The editorial floor was right at the top of the building. We were halfway up before I realized what was wrong with Clarissa. Clarissa, you're wearing yesterday's clothes. She smirked. So would you be, if you'd met yesterday's man. Oh Clarissa. What am I going to do with you? Pay rise, strong coffee, paracetamol. She beamed as she ticked off the points on her fingers. I reminded myself that Clarissa did not have some of the wonderful things I had in my life, such as my beautiful son Batman, and that she was therefore almost certainly less fulfilled than I was. It was a 10:30 A. M. Start for my junior staff, bless them, and none of them were in yet. Up on the editorial floor, the cleaners were still in. They were Hoovering, and dusting desk tops, and turning upside down all the framed photos of my staffs awful boyfriends, to prove they'd dusted under them. This was the grin-and-bear-it part of editing Nixie. At Vogue or Marie Claire, one's editorial staff would be at their desks by eight, dressed in Chloe and sipping green tea. On the other hand, they wouldn't still be there at mid

night scrawling CE CINESTAS PRET-A-PORTER on a sample box they were returning to a venerable Paris fashion house. Clarissa sat on the corner of my desk and I sat behind it, and we looked out over the open plan at the gang of black faces spiriting away yesterday's fabric swatches and Starbucks cups. We talked about the issue we were closing. The ad-sales people had done unusually well that month perhaps the spiraling cost of street drugs had forced them to spend more time in the office and we realized we had more editorial material than space. I had a Real Life feature I really thought should go in a profile of a woman who was trying to get out of Baghdad and Clarissa had a piece on a new kind of orgasm you could apparently only get with the boss. We talked about which of them we would run with. I was only half concentrating. I texted Andrew, to see how he was doing. The flatscreen at our end of the floor was showing BBC News 24 with the sound down. They were running a segment on the war. Smoke was rising above one of the countries involved. Don't ask me which I'd lost track by that stage. The war was four years old. It had started in the same month my son was born, and they'd grown up together. At first both of them were a huge shock and demanded constant attention but as each year went by, they became more autonomous and one could start to take one's eye off them for example Gosh, haven't you grown? I was interested in how this new kind of orgasm was meant to work. I looked up from texting. How come you can only have it with your boss? It's a forbidden-fruit thing, isn't it? You get an extra frisson from breaking the office taboo. From hormones and neurotransmitters and so forth. You know. Science. Um. Have scientists actually proved this? Don't get empirical with me, Sarah. We're talking about a whole new realm of sexual pleasure. We're calling it the B-spot. B, as in boss. See what we did there? Ingenious. Thank you darling. We do try. I wept inwardly at the thought of women up and down the country being pleased by middle managers in shiny-bottomed suits. On the flatscreen, News 24 had panned from the Middle East to Africa. Different landscape, same column of thick black smoke. A pair of jaundiced eyes looking out with the same impassivity Andrew had shown, just before I turned away to leave for work. The hairs on my arms went up again. I looked away, and took the three steps to the window that gave out on to Commercial Street. I put my forehead against the glass, which is something I do when I'm trying to think. Are you all right, Sarah? I'm fine. Listen, be a doll and go and grab us a couple of coffees, would you? Clarissa went off to our idiosyncratic coffee machine, the one that would have been an in-house salonde the in Vogue offices. Down on Commercial Street, a police patrol car pulled up and parked at the curb in front of our building. A uniformed officer got out on each side. They looked at each other over the patrol-car roof. One of them had blond, cropped hair and the other had a bald patch as round and neat as a monk's. I watched him tilt his head to listen to the radio on his lapel. I smiled, thinking absently about a project Charlie was doing at his nursery. The Police: People Who Help Us, it was called. My son it goes without saying was magnificently unconvinced. At constant high alert in his bat cape and mask, Charlie believed a proud citizenry should be ready to help itself. Clarissa came back with two plastic lattes. In one of them the coffee machine had deposited a clear acrylic stirrer. In the other, it had elected not to do so. Clarissa hesitated over which to give me. First big editorial decision of the day, she said. Easy. I'm the boss. Give me the one with the stirrer. What if I don't? Then we may never get around to locating your B-spot, Clarissa. I'm warning you. Clarissa blanched, and passed me the coffee with the stirrer. I said, I like the Baghdad piece. Clarissa sighed, and slumped her shoulders. So do I, Sarah, of course I do. It's a great article. Five years ago, that's the one we'd have run with. No question. Five years ago our circulation was so low we had to take those risks. And that's how we got big by being different. That's us. Clarissa shook her head. Getting big's different from staying big. You know as well as I do, we can't be serving up morality tales while the other majors are selling sex. But why do you think our readers got dumb? It's not that. I think our original readers aren't reading magazines any more, that's all. They moved on to greater things, the same way you could if you'd just play the bloody game. Maybe you don't realize just how big you are now, Sarah. Your next job could be editing a national news paper. I sighed. How thrilling. I could put topless girls on every page. My missing finger itched. I looked back down at the police patrol car. The two officers were putting on their uniform caps. I tapped my mobile against my front teeth. Let's go for a drink after work, Clarissa. Bring your new man if you like. I'm bringing Andrew. Seriously? Out in public? With your husband? Isn't that terribly last season? It's terribly five years ago. Clarissa tilted her head at me. What are you telling me, Sarah? I'm not telling you anything, Clar. I like you too much to tell. I'm just asking myself, really. I'm asking if maybe the kind of choices I made five years ago weren't so bad after all. Clarissa smiled resignedly. Fine. But don't expect me to keep my hands off his hunky thighs under the table, just because he's your husband. You do that, Clarissa, and

Ill make you ju nior horo scopes ed itor for the rest of your nat ural life. My desk phone rang. I looked at the time on its screen: 10:25 A. M. Its fun ny how these de tails stay with you. I picked up the phone and it was re ception, sound ing bored to dis trac tion. At Nix ie we used re cep tion as a sin binif a girl got too bitchy on the ed ito ri al floor, we sent her down to do a week on the shini est desk. There are two po lice men here. Oh. They came in here? What do they want? Okay, lets think about why I might have di aled your num ber. They want to talk to me?&rdq wilk to muo; They did good when they made you the boss, Sarah. Fuck off. Why do they want to talk to me? A pause. I could ask them, I sup pose. If it isnt too much trou ble. A longer pause. They say they want to shoot a porny film in the of fice. They say theyre not re al po lice men and their willies are sim ply enor mous. Oh for gods sake. Tell them Ill be down. I hung up the phone and looked at Claris sa. The hairs on my arms were up again. The po lice, I said. Re lax, said Claris sa. They cant bust you for con spir acy to run a se ri ous fea ture piece. Be hind her the flatscreen was show ing Jon Stew art. He was laugh ing. His guest was laugh ing too. I felt bet ter. You had to find some thing to laugh about, that sum mer, the num ber of places that were go ing up in smoke. You laughed, or you put on a su per hero cos tume, or you tried for some kind of or gasm that sci ence had some how missed. I took the stairs down to the lob by, speed ing up as I went. The two po lice of fi cers were stand ing rather too close to geth er, with their caps in their hands and their big, sen si ble leather shoes on my black mar ble. The young one was blush ing hor ri bly. Im so sor ry, I said. I glared at the re cep tion ist and she grinned back at me from be neath her per fect blond side part. Sarah ORourke? Sum mers. Ex cuse me madam? Sarah Sum mers is my pro fes sion al name. The old er po lice man looked at me with no ex pres sion. This is a per son al mat ter, Mrs. ORourke. Is there some where we can go? I walked them up to the board room on the first floor. Tones of pink and vi olet, long glass ta ble, more neon. Can I get you a cof fee? Or tea? I mean, I cant ab so lute ly guar an tee itll come out as cof fee or tea. Our ma chine is a bit Per haps youd bet ter sit down, Mrs. ORourke. The of fi cers faces glowed un nat ural ly in the pink ish light. They looked like black-?and-?white-?movie men, col ored in by a com put er. One old er, the one with the bald patch. Maybe forty-?five. The younger one, with the blond cropped hair, maybe twen ty-?two or twen ty-?four. Nice lips. Quite full, and rather juicy-?look ing. He wasnt beau ti ful, but I was trans fixed by the way he stood and cast his eyes down def er en tial ly when he spoke. And of course theres always some thing about a uni form. You won der if the pro to col will peel off with the jack et, I sup pose. The two of them placed their uni form caps on the pur ple smoked glass. They ro tat ed the caps with their clean white fin gers. Both of them stopped at exact ly the same mo ment, as if some crit ical an gle they had prac ticed in ba sic train ing had pre cise ly been at tained. They stared at me. My mo bile chimed brash ly on the glass desk to pa text mes sage ar riv ing. I smiled. That would be An drew. Ive got some bad news for you, Mrs. ORourke, said the old er of fi cer. What do you mean? It came out more ag gres sive than I in tend ed. The po lice men stared at their caps on the ta ble. I need ed to look at the text mes sage that had just ar rived. As I reached out my hand to pick up my phone, I saw the two of them star ing at the stump of my miss ing fin ger. Oh. This? I lost it on hol iday. On a beach, ac tu al ly. The two po lice men looked at each oth er. They turned back to me. The old er one spoke. His voice was sud den ly hoarse. Were very sor ry, Mrs. ORourke. Oh, please, dont be. Its fine, re al ly. Im fine now. Its just a fin ger. Thats not what I meant, Mrs. ORourke. Im afraid weve been in struct ed to tell you that See, hon est ly, you get used to do ing with out the fin ger. At first you think its a big deal and then you learn to use the oth er hand. I looked up and saw the two of them watch ing me, gray-?faced and se ri ous. Neon crack led. On the wall clock, a fresh minute snapped over the old one. The re al ly fun ny thing is, I still feel it, you know? My fin ger, I mean. This miss ing one. Some times it ac tu al ly itch es. And I go to scratch it and theres noth ing there, of course. And in my dreams my fin ger grows back, and Im so hap py to have it back, even though Ive learned to do with out it. Isnt that silly? I miss it, do you see? It itch es. The young of fi cer took a deep breath and looked down at his note book. Your hus band was found un con scious at your prop er ty short ly af ter nine this morn ing, Mrs. ORourke. Your neigh bor heard cries and placed a 999 call to the ef fect that a male was ap par ent ly in dis tress. Po lice at tend ed the ad dress and forced en try to an up stairs room at nine-?fif teen A. M. , when An drew ORourke was found un con scious. Our of fi cers did ev ery thing they could and an am bu lance at tend ed and re moved the ca su al ty, but I am very sor ry to tell you, Mrs. ORourke, that your hus band was pro nounced dead at the scene athere we are nine thir ty-?three A. M. The po lice man closed his pad. Were very sor ry, madam. I picked up my phone. The new text was in deed from An drew. SO SOR RY, it said. He was sor ry. I switched the phone, and my self, on to silent mode. The si lence last ed all week. It rum bled in the taxi home. It howled when p h howle dI picked up Char lie from nurs ery. It crack led on the phone call with my par ents. It roared in my ears

while the undertaker explained the relative merits of oak and pine caskets. It cleared its throat apologetically when the obituary editor of The Times telephoned to check some last details. Now the silence had followed me in to the cold, echoing church. How to explain death to a four-year-old superhero? How to announce the precipitous arrival of grief? I hadn't even accepted it myself. When the policemen told me that Andrew was dead, my mind refused to contain the information. I am a very ordinary woman, I think, and I am quite well equipped to deal with every day evil. Interrupted sex, tough editorial decisions and malfunctioning coffee machines these my mind could readily accept. But my Andrew, dead? It still seemed physically impossible. At one point he had covered more than seven tenths of the earth's surface. And yet here I was, staring at Andrews plain oak coffin (A classic choice, madam), and it seemed rather small in the wide nave of the church. A silent, sickening dream. Mum my, where's Dad dy? I sat in the front pew of the church with my arms around my son, and realized I had begun to tremble. The vicar was delivering the eulogy. He was talking about my husband in the past tense. He made it sound very neat. It occurred to me that he had never had to deal with Andrew in the present tense, or proofread his columns, or feel him running down in side like a piece of broken clockwork. Charlie squirmed in my arms and asked his question again, the same one he'd asked ten times a day since Andrew died. Mum my, where's mine dad dy exactly now? I leaned down to his ear and whispered, He's in a really nice bit of heaven this morning, Charlie. There's a lovely long room where they all go after breakfast, with lots of interesting books and things to do. Oh. Is there painting-and-drawing? Yes, there's painting-and-drawing. Is mine dad dy doing drawing? No Charlie, Dad dy is opening the window and looking at the sky. I shivered, and wondered how long I would have to go on narrating my husband's afterlife. More words, then hymns. Hands took my elbows and led me outside. I observed myself standing in a graveyard beside a deep hole in the ground. Six suited undertakers were lowering a coffin on thick green silky ropes with tasseled ends. I recognized it as the coffin that had been standing on trestles at the front of the church. The coffin came to rest. The undertakers retrieved the ropes, each with a deft flick of the wrist. I remember thinking, I bet they do this all the time, as if it was some brilliant in sight. Someone thrust a lump of clay in to my hand. I realized I was being invited, even to throw it in to the hole. I stepped up to the edge. Neat, clean green grocers grass had been laid around the border of the grave. I looked down and saw the coffin glowing palely in the depths. Batman held tight to my leg and peered down in to the gloom with me. Mum my, why did the Bruce Wayne men put that box down in the hole? Let's not think about that now, darling. I'd spent so many hours explaining heaven to Charlie that week every room and book shelf and sand pit of it that I'd never really dealt with the issue of Andrews physical body at all. I thought it would be too much to ask of my son, at four, to understand the separation between body and soul. Looking back on it now, I think I underestimated a boy who could live simultaneously in Kingston-upon-Thames and Gotham City. I think if I'd managed to sit him down and explain it to him gently, he would have been perfectly happy with the duality. I knelt and put my arm around my son's shoulders. I did it to be tender, but my head was swimming and I realized that perhaps it was only Charlie who was stopping me from falling down the hole. I held on tighter. Charlie put his mouth to my ear and whispered. Where's mine dad dy right now? I whispered back. Your dad dy is in the heaven hills, Charlie. Very popular at this time of year. I think he's very happy there. Mmm. Is mine dad dy coming back soon? No, Charlie. People don't come back from heaven. We talked about that. Charlie pursed his lips. Mum my, he said again, why did they put that box down there? I suppose they want to keep it safe. Oh. Is they going to come and get it later? No Charlie, I don't think so. Charlie blinked. Under his bat mask he screwed up his face with the effort of trying to understand. Where is heaven, Mum my? Please, Charlie. Not now. What's in that box? Let's talk about this later, darling, all right? Mum my is feeling rather dizzy. Charlie stared at me. Is mine dad dy in that box? Your dad dy is in heaven, Charlie. **IS THAT BOX HEAVEN?** said Charlie, loudly. Every one was watching us. I couldn't speak. My son stared in to the hole. Then he looked up at me in absolute alarm. Mum my! Get him OUT! Get mine dad dy out of heaven! I held tightly on to his shoulders. Oh Charlie, please, you don't understand! **GET HIM OUT! GET HIM OUT!** My son squirmed in my grip and broke free. It happened very quickly. He stood at the very edge of the hole. He looked back at me and then he turned and inched forward, but the green grocers grass overlapped the edge of the hole and it yielded under his feet and he fell, with his bat cape flying behind him, down in to the grave. He landed with a thump on top of Andrews coffin. There was a single, uneffusant scream from one of the other mourners. I think it was the first sound, since Andrew died, that really broke the silence. The scream ran on and on in my mind. I felt nauseous, and the horizon lurched in

sane ly. Still kneel ing, I leaned out over the edge of the pit. Down be low, in the dark shad ow, my son was bang ing on the cof fin and scream ing Dad dy, Dad dy, get OUT! He clung to the cof fin lid, and plant ed his bat shoes against the side wall of the grave, and heaved against the screws that held the lid closed. I hung my arms down over the edge of the hole. I im plored Char lie to take my hands so I could pull him back up. I dont think he heard me at all. At first, my son moved with a breath less con fi dence. Bat man was un de feat ed, af ter all, that spring. He had over come the Pen guin, the Puf fin, and Mr. Freeze. It was sim ply not a pos si bil ity in my sons mind that he might not over come this new chal lenge. He screamed in rage and fury. He wouldnt give up, but if I am strict and force my self now to de cide up on the pre cise mo ment in this whole sto ry when my heart ir repara bly broke, it was the mo ment when I saw the wear i ness and the doubt creep in to my sons small mus cles as his fin gers slipped, for the tenth time, from the pale oak lid. The mourn ers clus tered around the edge of the grave, par alyzed by the hor ror of this thing, this first dis cov ery of death that was worse than death it self. I tried to go for ward but the hands on my el bows were hold ing me back. I strained against their grip and looked at all the hor ror-?struck faces around the grave and I was think ing, Why doesnt some one do some thing? But it is hard, very hard, to be the first. Fi nal ly it was Lit tle Bee who went down in to the grave and held up my son for oth er hands to haul out. Char lie was kick ing and bit ing and strug gling fu rious ly in his mud died mask and cape. He want ed to go back down. And it was Lit tle Bee, once she her self had been ex tri cat ed, who hugged him and held him back as he screamed, NO, NO, NO, NO, NO, while each of the prin ci pal mourn ers stepped on to the thin strip of green gro cers grass and dropped in their small hand fuls of clay. My sons scream ing seemed to go on for a cru el ly long time. I re mem ber won der ing if my mind would shat ter with the noise, like a wine glass bro ken by a so pra no. In fact a for mer col league of An drews, a war re port er who had been in Iraq and Dar fur, did call me a few days lat er with the name of a com bat-?fa tigue coun selor he used. Thats kind of you, I told him, but I havent been at war. At the grave side, when the scream ing was over, I picked up Char lie and held him on my front, with his head rest ing on my shoul der. He was ex haust ed. Through the eye holes of his bat mask, I could see his eye lids droop ing. I watched the oth er mourn ers fil ing away in a slow line to ward the car park. Bright ly col ored um brel las broke out above the somber suits. It was start ing to rain. Lit tle Bee stayed be hind with me. We stood by the side of the grave and we stared at each oth er. Thank you, I said. It is noth ing, said Lit tle Bee. I just did what any one would do. Yes, I said. Ex cept that ev ery one else didnt. Lit tle Bee shrugged. It is eas ier when you are from out sipe. Re fromde. I shiv ered. The rain came down hard er. This is nev er go ing to end, I said. Is it, Lit tle Bee? How ev er long the moon dis ap pears, some day it must shine again. That is what we used to say in my vil lage. April show ers bring May flow ers. Thats what we used to say in mine. We tried to smile at each oth er. I nev er did drop my own clay in to the grave. I couldnt seem to put it down ei ther. Two hours lat er, alone for a mo ment at the kitchen ta ble of our house, I re al ized I was still grip ping it. I left it there on the table cloth, a small beige lump on top of the clean blue cot ton. When I came back a few min utes lat er, some one had been past and ti died it. A few days later the obituary in The Times noted that there...

three ONE OF THE THINGS I would have to ex plain to the girls from back home, if I was telling them this sto ry, is the sim ple lit tle word hor ror. It means some thing dif fer ent to the peo ple from my vil lage. In your coun try, if you are not scared enough al ready, you can go to watch a hor ror film. Af ter ward you can go out of the cin ema in to the night and for a lit tle while there is hor ror in ev ery thing. Per haps there are mur der ers ly ing in wait for you at home. You think this be cause there is a light on in your house that you are cer tain you did not leave on. And when you re move your make up in the mir ror last thing, you see a strange look in your own eyes. It is not you. For one hour you are haunt ed, and you do not trust any body, and then the feel ing fades away. Hor ror in your coun try is some thing you take a dose of to re mind your self that you are not suf fer ing from it. For me and the girls from my vil lage, hor ror is a dis ease and we are sick with it. It is not an ill ness you can cure your self of by stand ing up and let ting the big red cin ema seat fold it self up be hind you. That would be a good trick. If I could do that, please be lieve me, I would al ready be stand ing in the foy er. I would be laugh ing with the kiosk boy, and ex chang ing British one-?pound coins for hot but tered pop corn, and say ing, Phew, thank the Good Lord all that is over, that is the most fright en ing film I ev er saw and I think next time I will go to see a com edy, or maybe a ro man tic film with kiss ing. But the film in your mem ory, you can not walk out of it so eas ily. Wher ev er you go it is al ways play ing. So when I say that I am a refugee, you must un der stand that there is no refuge. Some days I won der how many there

are just like me. Thou sands, I think, just float ing on the oceans right now. In be tween our world and yours. If we can not pay smug glers to trans port us, we stow away on car go ships. In the dark, in freight con tain ers. Breath ing qui et ly in the dark ness, hun gry, hear ing the strange clank ing sounds of ships, smelling the diesel oil and the paint, lis ten ing to the bom-?bom-?bom of the en gines. Wide-?awake at night, hear ing the singing of Aftwhales ris ing up from the deep sea and vi brat ing through the ship. All of us whis per ing, pray ing, think ing. And what are we think ing of? Of phys ical safe ty, of peace of mind. Of all these imag inary coun tries that are now be ing served in the foy er. I stowed away in a great steel boat, but the hor ror stowed away in side me. When I left my home land I thought I had es caped but out on the open sea, I start ed to have night mares. I was naive to sup pose I had left my coun try with noth ing. It was a heavy car go that I car ried. They un load ed my car go in a port on the es tu ary of the Thames riv er. I did not walk across the gang plank, I was car ried off the ship by your im mi gra tion of fi cials and they put me in to de ten tion. It was no joke in side the de ten tion cen ter. What will I say about this? Your sys tem is cru el, but many of you were kind to me. You sent char ity box es. You dressed my hor ror in boots and a col or ful shirt. You sent it some thing to paint its nails with. You post ed it books and news pa pers. Now the hor ror can speak the Queens En glish. This is how we can speak now of sanc tu ary and refuge. This is how I can tell you soon-?soon as we say in my coun try a lit tle about the thing I was run ning from. There are things the men can do to you in this life, I promise you, it would be much bet ter to kill your self first. Once you have this knowl edge, your eyes are al ways flick er ing from this place to that, watch ing for the mo ment when the men will come. In the im mi gra tion de ten tion cen ter, they told us we must be dis ci plined to over come our fears. This is the dis ci pline I learned: when ev er I go in to a new place, I work out how I would kill my self there. In case the men come sud den ly, I make sure I am ready. The first time I went in to Sarahs bath room I was think ing, Yes Lit tle Bee, in here you would break the mir ror of that medicine cab inet and cut your wrists with the splin ters. When Sarah took me for a ride in her car I was think ing, Here, Lit tle Bee, you would roll down the win dow and un buck le your seat belt and tip your self out of the win dow, no fuss, in front of the very next lor ry that comes the oth er way. And when Sarah took me for a day in Rich mond Park, she was look ing at the scenery but I was look ing for a hol low in the ground where I could hide and lie very still un til all that you would find of me was a small white skull that the fox es and the rab bits would fuss over with their soft, wet noses. If the men come sud den ly, I will be ready to kill my self. Do you feel sor ry for me, for think ing al ways in this way? If the men come and they find you not ready, then it will be me who is feel ing sor ry for you. For the first six months in the de ten tion cen ter, I screamed ev ery night and in the day I imag ined a thou sand ways to kill my self. I worked out how to kill my self in ev ery sin gle one of the sit ua tions a girl like me might get in to in the de ten tion cen ter. In the med ical wing, mor phine. In the clean ers room, bleach. In the kitchens, boil ing fat. You think I am ex ag ger at ing? Some of the oth ers that were de tained with me, they re al ly did these things. The de ten tion of fi cers sent the bod ies away in the night, be cause it was not good for the lo cal peo ple to see the slow am bu lances leav ing that place. Or what if they re leased me? And I went to a movie and I had to kill my self there? I would throw my self down from the pro jec tion gallery. Or a restaurant? I would hide in the biggest re frig er ator and go in to a long, cool sleep. Or the sea side? Ah, at the sea side, I would steal an ice-?cream van and drive it into the sea. You would nev er see me again. The on ly thing Che to show that a fright ened African girl had ev er ex ist ed would be two thou sand melt ing ice creams, bob bing in their pack ets on the cool blue waves. Af ter a hun dred sleep less nights I had fin ished work ing out how to kill my self in ev ery sin gle cor ner of the de ten tion cen ter and the coun try out side, but I still car ried on imag in ing. I was weak from hor ror and they put me in the med ical wing. Away from the oth er pris on ers I lay be tween the scratchy sheets and I spent each day all alone in my mind. I knew they planned to de port me so I start ed to imag ine killing my self back home in Nige ria. It was just like killing myself in the de ten tion cen ter but the scenery was nicer. This was a small and un ex pect ed hap pi ness. In forests, in qui et vil lages, on the sides of moun tains I took my own life again and again. In the most beau ti ful places I se cret ly lin gered over the act. Once, in a deep and hot jun gle that smelled of wet moss and the ex cre ment of mon keys, I took near ly one whole day to chop down trees and build a tall tow er to hang my self from by the neck. I had a ma chete. I imag ined the sticky sap on my hands and the sweet hon ey smell of it, the good tired feel ing in my arms from the chop ping, and the screech es of the mon keys who were an gry when I cut their trees down. I worked hard in my imag ina tion and I tied the tree trunks to geth er with vines and creep ers and I used a spe cial knot that my sis ter Nkiru ka showed me. It was a big days work for a small girl. I was proud. At the end of that whole day alone in my sickbed work ing on my sui cide tow er, I re al ized I could just have climbed a



jun gle tree and jumped with my sil ly head first on to a rock. This was the first time that I smiled. I be gan to eat the meals they brought me. I thought to my self, you must keep up your strength, Lit tle Bee, or you will be too weak to kill your fool ish self when the time ar rives, and then you will be sor ry. I start ed to walk from the med ical wing to the can teen at meal times, so that I could choose my food in stead of hav ing it brought to me. I start ed ask ing my self ques tions like: Which will make me stronger for the act of sui cide? The car rots or the peas? In the can teen there was a tele vi sion that was al ways on. I be gan to learn more about life in your coun try. I watched pro grams called Love Is land and Hells Kitchen and Who Wants to Be a Mil lion aire? and I worked out how I would kill my self on all of those shows. Drown ing, knives, and ask the au dience. One day the de ten tion of fi cers gave all of us a copy of a book called LIFE IN THE UNIT ED KING DOM. It ex plains the his to ry of your coun try and how to fit in. I planned how I would kill my self in the time of Churchill (stand un der bombs), Vic to ria (throw my self un der a horse), and Hen ry the Eighth (mar ry Hen ry the Eighth). I worked out how to kill my self un der Labour and Con ser va tive gov ern ments, and why it was not im por tant to have a plan for suicide un der the Lib er al Democrats. I be gan to un der stand how your coun try worked. They moved me out of the med ical wing. I still screamed in the night, but not ev ery night. I re al ized that I was car ry ing two car goes. Yes, one of them was hor ror, but the oth er one was hope. I re al ized I had killed my self back to life. I read your nov els. I read the news pa pers you sent. In the opin ion columns I un der lined the grand sen tences and I looked up ev ery word in my Collins Gem. I prac ticed for hours in front of the mir ror un til I could make the big words look nat ural in my mouth. 0% width=5%>I read a lot about your Roy al Fam ily. I like your Queen more than I like her En glish. Do you know how you would kill your self during a gar den par ty with Queen Eliz abeth the Sec ond on the great lawn of Buck ing ham Palace in Lon don, just in case you were in vit ed? I do. Me, I would kill my self with a bro ken cham pagne glass, or maybe a sharp lob ster claw, or even a small piece of cu cum ber that I could suck down in to my wind pipe, if the men sud den ly came. I of ten won der what the Queen would do, if the men sud den ly came. You can not tell me she does not think about it a lot. When I read in LIFE IN THE UNIT ED KING DOM about some of the things that have hap pened to the wom en in the Queens job, I un der stood that she must think about it all of the time. I think that if the Queen and I met then we would have many things in com mon. The Queen smiles some times but if you look at her eyes in her por trait on the back of the five-?pound note, you will see she is car ry ing a heavy car go too. The Queen and me, we are ready for the worst. In pub lic you will see both of us smil ing and some times even laugh ing, but if you were a man who looked at us in a cer tain way we would both of us make sure we were dead be fore you could lay a sin gle fin ger on our bod ies. Me and the Queen of Eng land, we would not give you the sat is fac tion. It is good to live like this. Once you are ready to die, you do not suf fer so bad ly from the hor ror. So I was ner vous but I was smil ing, be cause I was ready to die, that morn ing they let us girls out of de ten tion. I will tell you what hap pened when the taxi driv er came. The four of us girls, we were wait ing out side the Im mi gra tion De ten tion Cen tre. We were keeping our backs to it, be cause this is what you do to a big gray mon ster who has kept you in his bel ly for two years, when he sud den ly spits you out. You keep your back to him and you talk in whis pers, in case he re mem bers you and the clever idea comes in to his mind to swal low you all up again. I looked across to Yevette, the tall pret ty girl from Ja maica. Ev ery time I looked at her be fore, she was laugh ing and smil ing. But now her smile looked as ner vous as mine. What is wrong? I whis pered. Yevette moved her mouth close to my ear. It aint safe out ere. But they have re leased us, havent they? We are free to go. What is the prob lem? Yevette shook her head and whis pered again. Aint dat sim ple, dar lin. Deres free dom as in, yu girls is free to go, and den deres free dom as in, yu girls is free to go till we catch es yu. Sor ry, but its dat sec ond kind of free dom we got right now, Lil Bee. Truth. Dey call it bein a il le gal im mi grant. I dont un der stand, Yevette. Yeh, an I cant ex plain it to yu here. Yevette looked across at the oth er two girls, and be hind her at the de ten tion cen ter. When she turned back to me, she leaned close in to my ear again. I played a trick to get us let out of dere. What sort of trick? &ldquo;Cdtho;Shh, dar lin. Dey is too many lis seners in dis place, Bee. Trus me, we got to find some place we can hide up. Den I can ex plain de sit ua tion to yu at leisure. Now the oth er two girls were star ing at us. I smiled at them and I tried not to think about what Yevette said. We were sit ting on our heels at the main gate of the de ten tion cen ter. The fences stretched away from us on both sides. The fences were as high as four men and they had ra zor wire on the tops, in nasty black rolls. I looked at the oth er three girls and I start ed gig gling. Yevette stood up and she put her hands on her hips and made big eyes at me. Why de hell yu laugh in, Lit tle Bug? My name is Lit tle Bee, Yevette, and I am laugh ing be cause of this fence. Yevette looked up at it. My god, dar lin, yu Nye-?jir ryans

is worse dan yu look. Yu tink dis fence is fun ny, me hope me nev er see de fence yu con sid da to be sir ius. It is the ra zor wire, Yevette. I mean, look at us girls. Me with my un der wear in a see-?through plas tic bag and you in your flip-?flops, and this girl in her nice yel low sari, and this one with her doc uments. Do we look like we could climb that fence? I am telling you, girls, they could take away that ra zor wire and they could put pound coins and fresh man goes on the top of the fence and we still could not climb out. Now Yevette start ed to laugh, WU-?ha-?ha-?ha-?ha, and she scold ed me with her fin ger. Yu fool ish girl! Yu tink dey build dis fence for to keep us girls in? Yu crazy? Dey build dis fence for to keep all de boys out. Dem boys know de qual ity of de oomans dey keep lock up in dis place, dey be brekkin down de doors! I was laugh ing, but then the girl with the doc uments spoke. She was sit ting on her heels and look ing down at her Dun lop Green Flash train ers. Where all of us go ing to go? Wher ev er de taxi take us, yu nah see it? An den we take it on from dere. Bright en up dat gloomy face, dar lin! We go ing dere, in Eng land. Yevette point ed her fin ger out through the open gate. The girl with the doc uments looked up at where she was point ing, and so did the sari girl, and so did I. It was a bright morn ing, I told you this al ready. It was the month of May and there was warm sun shine drip ping through the holes be tween the clouds, like the sky was a bro ken blue bowl and a child was try ing to keep hon ey in it. We were at the top of the hill. There was a long tar mac road wind ing from our gate all the way to the hori zon. There was no traf fic on it. At our end the road fin ished where we satit did not go any where else. On both sides of the road there were fields. And these were beau ti ful fields, with bright green grass so fresh it made you hun gry. I looked at those fields and I thought, I could get down on my hands and my knees and put my face in to that grass and eat and eat and eat. And that is what a very great num ber of cows were do ing to the left of the road, and an even greater num ber of sheep to the right. In the near est field a white man in a small blue trac tor was pulling some im ple ment across the ground, but do not ask me what was its func tio Cas n. Anoth er white man in blue clothes that I think you call over alls, he was ty ing a gate closed with bright or ange rope. The fields were very neat and square, and the hedgerows be tween them were straight and low. It is big, said the girl with the doc uments. Nah, it aint nuthin, said Yevette. We jus got to get to Lon don. Me know pip ple dere. I do not know peo ple, said the girl with the doc uments. I do not know any one. Well, yu jus gonna do yore best, dar lin. The girl with the doc uments frowned. How come there no one here to help us? How come my case work er she not here to fetch me? How come they give us no re lease pa pers? Yevette shook her head. Aint yu got nuff pa pers in dat bag of yours al ready, dar lin? Some peo ple, yu give em de inch, dey want de whole mile. Yevette laughed, but her eyes looked des per ate. Now where is dat dam taxi? she said. The man on the phone said ten min utes. Feel like ten years al ready, truth. Yevette fell qui et. We looked out over the coun try side again. The land scape was deep and wide. A breeze blew across it. We sat there on our heels and we watched the cows and the sheep and the white man ty ing the gates closed around them. Af ter some time our taxi came in to sight. We watched it from the mo ment it was a small white speck at the dis tant end of the road. Yevette turned to me and she smiled. Dis taxi driv er, he soun cute on de phone? I did not talk to the driv er. I on ly talked to the taxi con troller. Eigh teen month I gone with out a man, Bug. Dis taxi driv er bet ter be a rill Mis ter Men tion, yu know what Im sayin? Me like em tall, wid a bit o fat on em. Me no like no skin ny boys. An me like em dress fine. Got no time fo losers, aint dat right? I shrugged. I watched the taxi get ting near er. Yevette looked at me. What sor ta man yu like, Lil Bug? I looked at the ground. There was grass there, push ing out of the tar mac, and I twist ed it in my hands. When I thought about men, I felt a fear in my bel ly so sharp it was like knives pierc ing me. I did not want to speak, but Yevette nudged me with her el bow. Come on, Bug, what sor ta boy be madams type? Oh, you know, the usu al sort. What? What yu mean, de yoo-?su al sort? Tall, short, skin ny, fat? I looked down at my hands. I think my ide al man would speak many lan guages. He would speak Ibo and Yoru ba and En glish and French and all of the oth ers. He could speak with any per son, even the sol diers, and if ther Cs, e was vi olence in their heart he could change it. He would not have to fight, do you see? Maybe he would not be very hand some, but he would be beau ti ful when he spoke. He would be very kind, even if you burned his food be cause you were laugh ing and talk ing with your girl friends in stead of watch ing the cook ing. He would just say, Ah, nev er mind. Yevette looked at me. For give me, Bug, but yore ide al man, he dont sound very ril lis tic. The girl with the doc uments, she looked up from her Dun lop Green Flash train ers. Leave her alone. Cant you see she is a vir gin? I looked at the ground. Yevette, she stared at me for a long time and then she put her hand on the back of my neck. I ground the toe of my boot in to the ground and Yevette looked at the girl with the doc uments. How yu know dis, dar lin? The girl shrugged and she point ed at the doc uments in her see-?through plas tic bag. I have seen things. I know about peo ple. So how come yu

so qui et, if yu know so dam much? The girl shrugged again. Yevette stared at her. What dey call yu any way, dar lin? I do not tell peo ple my name. This way it is safer. Yevette rolled her eyes. Bet you dont give de boys your phone num ber, nei ther. The girl with the doc uments, she stared at Yevette. Then she spat on the ground. She was trem bling. You dont know any thing, she said. If you knew one thing about this life you would not think it was so fun ny. Yevette put her hands on her hips. She shook her head slow ly. Dar lin, she said. Life did take its gifts back from yu and me in de diffren or der, dats all. Truth to tell, fun ny is all me got lef wid. An yu, dar lin, all yu got lef is pa per work. They stopped then, be cause the taxi was pulling up. It stopped just in front of us. The side win dow was open and there was mu sic blast ing out. I will tell you what that mu sic was. It was a song called We Are the Cham pi ons by a British mu sic band called Queen. This is why I knew the song: it is be cause one of the of fi cers in the im mi gra tion de ten tion cen ter, he liked the band very much. He used to bring his stereo and play the mu sic to us when we were locked in our cells. If you danced and swayed to show you liked the mu sic, he would bring you ex tra food. One time he showed me a pic ture of the band. It was the pic ture from the CD box. One of the mu si cians in the pic ture, he had a lot of hair. It was black with tight curls and it sat on the top of his head like a heavy weight and it went right down the back of his neck to his shoul ders. I un der stand fash ion in your lan guage, but this hair did not look like fash ion, I am telling you, it looked like a pun ish ment. One of the oth er de ten tion of fi cers came past while we were look ing at the pic ture on the CD box, and he point ed to the mu si cian with C mu all that hair and he said, What a cock. I re mem ber that I was very pleased, be cause I was still learn ing to re al ly speak your lan guage back then, and I was just be gin ning to un der stand that one word can have two mean ings. I un der stood this word straight away. I could see that cock re ferred to the mu si cians hair. It was like a cock er els comb, you see. So a cock was a cock er el, and it was al so a man with that kind of hair. I am telling you this be cause the taxi driv er had ex act ly that kind of hair. When the taxi stopped out side the main gate of the de ten tion cen ter, the driv er did not get out of his seat. He looked at us through the open win dow. He was a thin white man and he was wear ing sun glass es with dark green lens es and shiny gold frames. The girl in the yel low sari, she was amazed by the taxi car. I think she was like me and she had nev er seen such a big and new and shin ing white car. She walked all around it and stroked her hands across its sur faces and she said, Mm mm. She was still hold ing the emp ty see-through bag. She took one hand off the bag and traced the let ters on the back of the car with her fin ger. She spoke their names very slow ly and care ful ly, the way she had learned them in the de ten tion cen ter. She said, FORDhmm! Fod! When she got to the front of the car, she looked at the head lights, and she blinked. She put her head on one side, and then she put it straight again, and she looked the car in the eyes and gig gled. The taxi driv er watched her all this time. Then he turned back to the rest of us girls and the ex pres sion on his face was like a man who has just re al ized he has swal lowed a hand grenade be cause he thought it was a plum. Your friends not right in the head, he said. Yevette poked me in the stom ach with her el bow. Yu bet ter do de talkin, Lil Bug, she whis pered. I looked at the taxi driv er. We Are the Cham pi ons was still play ing on his stereo, very loud. I re al ized I need ed to tell the taxi driv er some thing that showed him we were not refugees. I want ed to show that we were British and we spoke your lan guage and un der stood all the sub tle things about your culture. Al so, I want ed to make him hap py. This is why I smiled and walked up to the open win dow and said to the taxi driv er, Hel lo, I see that you are a cock. I do not think the driv er un der stood me. The sour ex pres sion on his face be came even worse. He shook his head from side to side, very slow ly. He said, Dont they teach you mon keys any man ners in the jun gle? And then he drove away, very quick ly, so that the tires of his taxi squealed like a ba by when you take its milk away. The four of us girls, we stood and watched the taxi dis ap pear ing back down the hill. The cows to the left of the road and the sheep to the right of the road, they watched it too. Then they went back to eat ing the grass, and we girls went back to sit ting on our heels. The wind blew, and the rolls of ra zor wire rat tled on the top of the fence. The shadows of small high clouds drift ed across the coun try side. It was a long time be fore any of us spoke. Mebbe we shoul da let Sari Girl do de talkin. Im sor ry. Damn Africans. You al ways tink yu Calw so smart but yu ig no rant. I stood and walked up to the fence. I held on to the chain link and stared through it, down the hill and over the fields. Down there the two farm ers were still work ing, the one driv ing the trac tor and the oth er ty ing up the gates. Yevette came and stood be side me. What we gonna do now, Bug? No way we can stay here. Lets jus walk, okay? I shook my head. What about those men down there? You tink dey gonna stop us? I gripped on tighter to the wire. I dont know, Yevette. I am scared. What yu scared of, Bug? Maybe dey jus leave us be. Un less yu plan nin on call in dem names too, like you done dat taxi man? I smiled and shook my head. Well all right den. Don be fraid. Me come wid yu, any road. Keep a

check on dem mon key man ners you got. Yevette turned to the girl with the documents. What bout you, lil miss no-name? You com min wid? The girl looked back at the de ten tion cen ter. Why they didnt give us more help? Why they didnt send our case work ers to meet us? Well, cos dey did not elect to do dat, dar lin. So what yu gonna do? Yu gonna go back in dere, ask em fo a car, an a boyfren, an mebbe some nice jool-?rie? The girl shook her head. Yevette smiled. Bless yu, dar lin. An now fo yu, Sari Girl. Me gonna make dis easy fo yu. Yu comin wid us, dar lin. If yu agree, say nuthin. The girl with the sari blinked at her, and tilt ed her head to one side. Good. We all in, Lil Bug. We all walk ing out of dis place. Yevette turned to ward me but I was still watch ing the girl. The wind blew at her yel low sari and I saw there was a scar across her throat, right across it, thick like your lit tle fin ger. It was white as a bone against her dark skin. It was knot ted and curled around her wind pipe, like it did not want to let go. Like it thought it still had a chance of fin ish ing her off. She saw me look ing and she hid the scar with her hand, so I looked at her hand. There were scars on that too. We have our agree ment about scars, I know, but this time I looked away be cause some times you can see too much beau ty. We walked through the gates and down the tar mac road to the bot tom of the hill. Yevette went first and I was sec ond and the oth er two went be hind me. I looked down at Yevettes heels all the way. I did not look left or right. My heart was pound ing when we reached the bot tom of the hill. The rum bling noise of the trac tor grew loud er un til it drowned out the sound of Yevettes flip-?flops. When the trac tor noise grew qui eter be hind us I breathed more eas ily again. It is okay, I thought. We have passed them, and of course there wasnt any trou ble. How fool ish I was C fo to be scared. Then the trac tor noise stopped. Some where near by a bird sang, in the sud den si lence. Wait, said a mans voice. I whis pered to Yevette, Keep walk ing. WAIT! Yevette stopped. I tried to go past her but she held on to my arm. Be sir rius, dar lin. Where yu gonna run to? I stopped. I was so scared, I was strug gling to breathe. The oth er girls looked the same. The girl with no name, she whis pered in my ear again. Please. Let us turn around and go back up the hill. These peo ple do not like us, cant you see? The trac tor man got down from his cab. The oth er man, the one who was ty ing up the gates, he came and joined the first man. They stood in the road, be tween us and the de ten tion cen ter. The trac tor driv er was wear ing a green jack et and a cap. He stood with his hands in his pock ets. The man who had been ty ing the gates the man in the blue over alls she was very big. The trac tor driv er on ly came up to his chest. He was so tall that the trousers of his overalls end ed high er than his socks, and he was very fat too. There was a wide pink roll of fat un der his neck, and the fat bulged out in the gaps be tween the bot tom of his overalls and the top of his socks. He was wear ing a woolen hat pulled down tight. He took a pack et of to bac co out of his pock et, and he made a cigarette with out tak ing his eyes off us girls. He had not shaved, and his nose was swollen and red. His eyes were red too. He lit his cigarette, and blew out the smoke, and spat on the ground. When he spoke, his fat wob bled. You es caped, ave you, my chil dren? The trac tor driv er laughed. Dont mind Small Al bert, he said. We girls looked at the ground. Me and Yevette, we were in front, and the girl with the yel low sari and the girl with no name stood be hind us. The girl with no name, she whis pered in my ear. Please. Let us turn around and go. These peo ple will not help us, cant you see? They can not hurt us. We are in Eng land now. It is not like it was where we came from. Please, lets just go. I watched her hop ping from one foot to the oth er foot in her Dun lop Green Flash train ers. I did not know whether to run or to stay. But ave you? said the tall fat man. Es caped? I shook my head. No mis ter. We have been re leased. We are of fi cial refugees. You got proof of that, I sup pose? Our pa pers are held by our case work ers, said the girl with no name. The tall fat man looked all around us. He looked up and down the road. He stretched up to look over the hedge in to the next field. I dont see no case work ers, he said. Call them if you do not be lieve us, said the girl with no name. Call the Bor der and Im mi gra tion Agen cy. Tell them to check their files. They will tell you we are le gal. She looked in her plas tic bag full of doc uments un til she found the pa per she want ed. Here, she said. The num ber is here. Call it, and you will see. No. Please. Dont do dat, said Yevette. The girl with no name stared at her. What is the prob lem? she said. They re leased us, didnt they? Yevette gripped her hands to geth er. It aint dat sim ple, she whis pered. The girl with no name stared at Yevette. There was fury in her eyes. What have you done? she said. What me had to do, said Yevette. At first the girl with no name looked an gry and then she was con fused and then, slow ly, I could see the ter ror come in to her eyes. Yevette reached out her hands to her. Sor ry, dar lin. I wish it werent dis way. The girl pushed Yevettes hands away. The trac tor driv er took a step for ward, and looked at us, and sighed. I reckon its bloody typ ical, Small Al bert, I re al ly do. He looked at me with sad ness and I felt my stom ach twist ing. You ladies are in a very vul ner able sit ua tion with out pa pers, arent you? Cer tain peo ple might take ad van tage of that. The wind blew through the fields. My throat was closed so tight I could not speak.

The tractor driver coughed. Its bloody typical of this government, he said. I dont give a damn if youre legal or illegal. But how can they release you without papers? Left hand doesnt know what the right hand is up to. Is that everything youve got? I held up my see-through plastic bag, and when the other girls saw me they held up theirs too. The tractor driver shook his head. Bloody typical, isnt it Albert? Wouldnt know, Mr. Ayres. This government doesnt care about any one. Youre not the first people weve seen, wandering through these fields like Martians. You dont even know what planet youre on, do you? Bloody government. Doesnt care about you refugees, doesnt care about the countryside, doesnt care about farmers. All this bloody government cares about is foxes and towns people. He looked up at the razor wire of the detention center behind us, then he looked at each of us girls in turn. You shouldnt even be in this situation in the first place. Its a disgrace, thats what Chatat it is, keeping girls like you locked up in a place like that. Isnt that right Albert? Small Albert took off his woolen hat and scratched his head, and looked up at the detention center. He blew cigarette smoke out of his nose. He did not say anything. Mr. Ayres looked at the four of us girls. So. What are we going to do with you? You want me to go back up there with you and tell them theyve got to hold on to you till your case workers can be contacted? Yvettes eyes went very wide when Mr. Ayres said this. No way mister. Me aint never goin back in that hell place no more. Not for one minute, kill me dead. Uh-uh. Mr. Ayres looked at me then. Im thinking they might have let you out by mistake, he said. Yes, thats what Im thinking. Am I right? I shrugged. The sari girl and the girl with no name, they just looked at the rest of us to see what was going to happen. Have you girls got anywhere to go? Any relatives? People expecting you somewhere? I looked at the other girls, and then I looked back at him and shook my head no. Is there any way you can prove that youre legal? I could be in trouble if I let you on to my land and then it turns out Im harboring illegal immigrants. I have a wife and three children. This is a serious question Im asking you. I am sorry, Mr. Ayres. We will not go on your land. We will just go. Mr. Ayres nodded, and took off his flat cap, and looked at the inside of it, and turned it around and around in his hands. I watched his fingers twisting in the green cloth. His nails were thick and yellow. His fingers were dirty with earth. A large black bird flapped over our heads and flew away in the direction where our taxi had disappeared. Mr. Ayres, he took a deep breath and he held up the inside of his cap for me to see. There was a name sewn in the lining of the hat. The name was written in hand writing on a white cloth label. The label was yellow from sweat. You read English? You see what that name label says? It says AYRES, mister. Thats right. Yes, thats it. I am Ayres, and this is my hat, and this land you girls are standing on is Ayres Farm. I work this land but I dont make the law for it, I just plow it spring and autumn and parallel with the contours. Do you suppose that gives me the right to say if these women can stay on it, Small Albert? The wind was the only sound for a while. Small Albert spat on the ground. Well Mr. Ayres, I aint a lawyer. Im a cow-and-pig man at the end of the day, aint I? Mr. Ayres laughed. You ladies can stay, he said. Then there was sobbing from behind me. It was the girl with no name. She held on to her bag of documents and she cried, and the girl with the yellow sari put her arms around her. She sang to her in a quiet voice, the way we would sing to a baby who was woken in the night by the sound of distant guns and who must be soothed without being further excited. I do not know if you have a word for this kind of singing. Albert took the cigarette from his mouth. He pinched it out between his thumb and forefinger. He rolled it in to a little ball and dropped it in to the pocket of his overalls. He spat on the ground again, and he put his woolen hat back on. Whats she blubbin for? Yvette shrugged. Maybe the girl just aint used to kindness. Albert thought about this. Then he nodded, slowly. I could put em in the pickers barn, Mr. Ayres? Thanks Albert. Yes, take them there and get them settled in. Ill get my wife to dig out what they need. He turned to us girls. We have a dormitory where our seasonal laborers sleep. Its empty at the moment. Its only needed around harvest and lambing. You can stay there a week, no longer. After that, youre not my problem. I smiled at Mr. Ayres, but Mr. Ayres waved away my smile with his hand. Maybe this is the way you would wave away a bee before it came too close. The four of us girls, we followed Albert across the fields. We walked in a single line. Albert walked in front in his wool hat and blue overalls. He was carrying a large ball of bright orange plastic rope. Then it was Yvette in her purple A-line dress and flip-flops, then me, and I was wearing the blue jeans and the Hawaiian shirt. Behind me there was the girl with no name, and she was still weeping, and then there was the girl in the yellow sari, who was still singing to her. The cows and the sheep moved aside to watch us as we walked across their fields. You could see them thinking, Here are some strange new creatures that Small Albert is leading. He took us to a long building beside a stream. The building had low brick walls, as high as my shoulder, but it had a high metal roof that rose in an arch from the walls, so that the building was like a tunnel. The metal

roof was not painted. There were no windows in the walls but there were plastic sky lights in the roof. The building stood in a dirt field where pigs and hens were scratching at the ground. When we appeared, the pigs stayed where they were and stared at us. The hens moved away with a nervous walk, looking behind them to make sure we were not following. The hens were ready to run if they needed to. They picked up each foot with a jerky movement and when they put the foot back down you could see the claws trembling. They moved closer to one another and made a muttering sound. The pitch of the noise rose each time one of us girls took a step closer, and it fell each time the hens put the distance back between them and us. It made me very unhappy to watch those hens. The way they moved and the noise they made, this is exactly how it was when Nkiruka and me finally left our village back home. We joined a group of women and girls and we ran off in to the jungle one morning and we walked until it was dark and then we lay down to sleep beside the path. We did not dare to make a fire. In the night we heard gun shots. We heard men screaming like pigs when they are waiting in the cage to have their throats cut. There was a full moon that night and if the moon had opened its mouth and started screaming I would not have been more terrified. Nkiruka held me tight. There were babies in our group and some of them woke up and had to have songs sung to them before they would settle. In the morning there was a tall, evil line of smoke rising over the fields where our village was. It was black smoke and it curled and boiled as it rose up in to the blue sky. Some of the very young children in our group asked what the smoke was from, and the women smiled and told them, It is just the smoke from a volcano, little ones. It is nothing to worry about. And I watched the way the smiles left their faces when they turned away from their children's eyes and stared back in to the blue sky filling with black. You all right? Albert was staring at me. I blinked. Yes. Thank you mister. Daydreaming, were you? Yes sir. Albert shook his head and laughed. Honestly, you young people. Heads in the clouds. He unlocked the long building and let us in. Inside there were two rows of beds, one row on each long wall. The beds were made of metal and they were painted dark green. There were clean white mattresses on the beds, and pillows with out pillowcases. The floor was concrete painted gray, and it was shining and swept. The sunlight came down in thick stripes from the sky lights. There were long loops of chain hanging down. They stretched right up in to the roof, which was the height of five men at the center of the building. Albert showed us how to pull on one side of each chain loop to open the sky light, and on the other side of the chain to close it. He showed us the cubicles at the end of the building where we could take a shower or use the toilet. Then he winked at us. There you go, ladies. The accommodation ain't up to hotel standard, I'll grant you, but then show me the hotel where you can get twenty Polish girls sharing your room and the management don't even bat an eyelid. You should see some of the things our harvesters get up to after lights-out. I'm telling you, I should chuck in the livestock work and make a film. Albert was laughing but the four of us girls, we stood there just looking back at him. I did not understand why he was talking about films. In my village, each year when the rains stopped, the men went to the town and they brought back a projector and a diesel generator, and they tied a rope between two trees, and we watched a film on a white sheet that they hung from the rope. There was no sound with the film, only the rumble of the generator and the shrieking of the creatures in the jungle. This is how we learned about your world. The only film we had was called Top Gun and we watched it five times. I remember the first time we saw it, the boys in my village were excited because they thought it was going to be a film about a gun, but it was not a film about a gun. It was a film about a man who had to travel everywhere very fast, sometimes on a motorbike and sometimes in an aeroplane that he flew himself, and sometimes upside down. We discussed this, the children in my village, and we decided two things: one, that the film should really be called The Man Who Was in a Great Hurry and two, that the moral of the film was that he should get up earlier so that he wouldn't have to rush to fit everything in to his day, instead of lying in bed with the woman with blond hair that we called The Stay-in-Bed Woman. That was the only film I had ever seen, so I did not understand when Albert said he should make a film. He did not look like he could fly an aeroplane upside down. In fact I had noticed how Mr. Ayres did not even let him drive his blue tractor. Albert saw us girls staring back at him, and he shook his head. Oh, never mind, he said. Look, there's blankets and towels and what have you in them cupboards over there. I dare say Mrs. Ayres will be down later with some food for you. I'll see you ladies around the farm, I shouldn't wonder. The four of us girls, we stood in the center of the building and we watched Albert as he walked out between the two lines of beds. He was still laughing to himself when he walked out in to the daylight. Yvette looked at the rest of us and she tapped her finger on the side of her head. Never mind him. De white mens is all crazy. She sat down on the edge of the nearest bed and she took a dried pineapple slice out of her see-through plas

tic bag and she start ed to chew on it. I sat down next to her, while the sari girl took the girl with no name down the room a lit tle way to lie down be cause she was still cry ing. Al bert had left the door open, and a few hens came in and be gan to look for food un der the beds. The girl with no name screamed when she saw the hens com ing in to the build ing, and she pulled her knees close to her chest and held a pil low in front of her. She sat there with her wide eyes pok ing out over the top of the pil low, and her Dun lop Green Flash train ers stick ing out un der neath it. Re-?LAX, dar lin. Dey int gonna hurt yu, dey is on ly chick ens, yu nah see it? Yvette sighed. Here we go again, huh Lil Bug? Yes. Here we go again. Dat girl in a bad way, huh? I looked over at the girl with no name. She was star ing at Yvette and mak ing the sign of the cross. Yes, I said. Mebbe dis is de hard est part, now dey is let tin us out. In dat de ten tion cen ter dey was al ways tellin yu, do dis, do dat. No time to tink. But now dey all ov va sud den gone qui et, no? Dat dan ger ous, me tellin yu. Let all de bad mem ory come back. You think that is why she is cry ing? Me know it, dar lin. We all got ta mind our heads now, truth. I shrugged and pulled my knees up to my chin. What do we do now, Yvette? No idea, dar lin. Yu ask me, dis gonna be our num mer one prob lem in dis coun try. Where me come from, we aint got no peace but we got a thou sand ru mors. Yu al ways got a whis per where yu can go for dis or dat. But here we got de op po site prob lem, Bug. We got peace but we aint got no in-?fo-?MAY-?shun, you know what Im sayin? I looked Yvette in the eyes. What is go ing on, Yvette? What is this trick you have done? How come they let us out of that place with out pa pers? Yvette sighed. Me did a fa vor for one of dem im mi gra tion men, all right? He make a few changes on de com put er, jus put a tick in de right box, yu know, anPOW!up come de names for re lease. Yu, me an dem two oth er girls. Dem de ten tion of fi cers dont be askin no ques tions. Dey jus see de names come up on dere com put er screen dis morn ing andBAM!dey take yu from your room and dey show you de door. Dey dont care if yore case work er be dere to pick yu up or not. Dey too busy peekin at de tit ty-?swingers in de news pa per, truth. So here we is. Free and ee-?zee. Ex cept we dont have pa pers. Yeah. But I aint afraid. I am afraid. Don be. Yvette squeezed my hand and I smiled. Dats me girl. I looked around the room. The sari girl and the girl with no name, they were six beds far ther along. I leaned in close to Yvette and I whis pered to her. Do you know any one in this coun try? Sure, dar lin. Williyam Shake speare, La dy Di ana, Bat tle of Brit ten. Me know dem all. Learned de names for me Cit izen ship Ex am. Yu can test me. No. I mean, do you know where you will go if we can get out of here? Sure dar lin. I got pip ple in Lon don. Got de half of Ja maica livin down on Cole Har bour Lane. Prob ly bitchin on how much dey vexed by all de Nye-?Jirri ans livin nex door. How bout yu? Yu got fam ly dere? I showed her the Unit ed King dom Driv ers Li cense from my see-?through plas tic bag. It was a small plas tic card with An drew ORourkes pho to on it. Yvette held it up to look at it. What ting is dis? It is a driv ing li cense. It has the mans ad dress on it. I am go ing to vis it him. Yvette held the pho to card close and stared at it. Then she held it far from her eyes and squint ed down her nose at it. Then she looked up close again. She blinked. Dis is a white man, Lil Bug. I know that. Okay, okay, jus checkin. Jus es tab lishin whether yu blind or stupid. I smiled but Yvette did not. We should stick to geth er, dar lin. Why yu no come to Lon don wid me? For sure we gonna find some of your pip ple down dere. But I will not know them, Yvette. I will not know I can trust them. What, and yu trust dis man? I met him once. Scuse me, Bug, but dis man dont look l Crsqike yo type. I met him in my coun try. What de hell was dis mans busi ness in Nye-?Jir rya? I met him on a beach. Yvette threw her head back and slapped her thighs. WU-?ha-?ha-?ha-?ha! Now me see. An dey tole me yu was a vir gin! I shook my head. It was not like that. Don tell me it wasnt like dat, Lil Miss Sexy-?Bug. Yu mus of done somet ing to de man, make him want to give yu dis vall-?able dock er ment. His wife was there too, Yvette. She is a beau ti ful la dy. She is called Sarah. So why he give yu his driv er li cense? His wife be so beau ti ful, he be tin king, Damn, me wont be need in dis again, me la dy so pret ty I aint nivver gonna drive nowhere no more, me jus gonna sit home an stare at de wife? I looked away. What, den? Yu stole dis dock er ment? No. What, den? What hap pen? I can not talk about it. It hap pened in an oth er life time. Mebbe yu bin spend ing too much time learnin yore fan cy En glish, Lil Bug, cos dat is crazy talk. Yu on ly be livin one life, dar lin. Dont mat ter yu dont uh-?preshie-?ate part of it, cos it dont stop bein part of yu. I shrugged and I lay back on the bed and I watched the near est chain dan gling from the roof. Ev ery link was joined to the one be fore and the one af ter. It was too strong for a girl like me to break. The whole chain swayed back and fro and it shone in the sun from the sky lights. Like you could pull on the grown-?up end and soon er or lat er you would get to the child, just like pulling a buck et out of a well. Like you would nev er be left hold ing a bro ken end, with noth ing at tached to it at all. It is hard for me to think about the day I met An drew and Sarah, Yvette. Now I can not de cide if I should go to vis it them or not. So tell me all bout it, Bug. Me tell yu if dey sound good fo

yu. I do not want to talk about it with you, Yevette. Yevette put her fists on her hips and made her big eyes at me. Well get yu, lil miss Africa! I smiled. I am sure there are parts of your life you do not like to talk about, Yevette. On ly so yu no get jeal ous, Bug. Me tell yu some of de tings me done in me life of ease an lux ury, yu be get tin yu self so jeal ous you gonna ex plode, and den Sari Girl over dere gonna have to mop Ca hup de mess, an she looks tired enough, yu ask me. No, I am se ri ous, Yevette. Do you talk about what hap pened to you, to make you come to the Unit ed King dom? Yevette stopped smil ing. Nah. Me tell pip ple what hap pen to me, dey aint nivver gonna be lieve it. Pip ple tink Ja maica be all sun shine an gan ja an Jah Rasta fari. But it aint. Yu get on de wrong side of de pol itics, Bug, dey gonna make yu suf fah. An dey gonna make yore fam ly suf fah. An me dont mean suf fah, like no ice cream fo a week. Me mean suf fah, like you wake up in you chillens blood, an sud den ly yo house is very very qui et, fo ivver an ivver, amen. Yevette sat com plete ly still and she looked down at her flip-?flops. I put my hand on her hand. Above our heads the chains swung to and fro, and then Yevette sighed. But pip ple nivver be lieve dat about me coun try. So what did you tell the man from the Home Of fice? For me asy lum in ter view? You wan na know what I tole him? Yes. Yevette shrugged. I tole him if he ar range to get me re lease from dat place, he can do what he want wid me. I dont un der stand. Yevette rolled her eyes. Well thank de lord de Home Of fice man was a lil bit smarter dan yu, Bug. Yu nivver no tice dey in ter view rooms didnt have no win dows? Me swear to yu, dat mans ooman mus of kept her legs cross for de las ten year, de way he took me up on me of fer. An it wasnt jus on de one day, mind. It took de man four in ter views fore he was cer tain me pa pers was in or der, yu know what Im sayin? I stroked her hand. Oh Yevette. It was nuthin, Bug. Com pare to what dey do to me, if I be sent back to Ja maica? Nuthin. Yevette smiled at me. The tears flowed from the cor ners of her eyes and around the curve of her cheek. I start ed to wipe her tears away and then I started cry ing as well, so Yevette had to wipe my tears too. It was fun ny, be cause we could not stop cry ing. Yevette start ed laugh ing, and then I was laugh ing too, and the more we laughed the more we could not stop cry ing, un til we made so much noise that the sari girl hissed at us to shush so we would not dis turb the wom an with no name, who was mak ing crazy talk to her self in some lan guage. Oh, look at de state of us, Bug. What we gonna do wid our selves? I do not know. You re al ly think you were re leased be cause of what you did with the Home Of fice man? Me know it, Bug. De man even tole me de date. But he didnt give you your pa pers? Uh-?uh. No pa pers. Him say dere a lim it to his powah, yu see what Im sayin? He be tickin one lit tle box on de com put er to tell dem of fi cers to Cem let us free, him can jus say, Me hand slipped. But ap provin de asy lum ap pli ca tion? Dats a diffren sto ry. So youre il le gal now? Yevette nod ded. Yu an me both, Bug. Yu an me an dem oth er two al so. All four of us get tin let out cos of what I done fo de Home Of fice man. Why all four of us, Yevette? Him say it look sus pi cious on im, if it just be me get tin let go. How did he choose the rest of us? Yevette shrugged. Close is eyes and stick a pin in de list, I dun no. I shook my head and looked down. What? said Yevette. Yu no like it, Bug? Yu girls should uh preshie-?ate what I done fo yu. But we cant do any thing with out pa pers, Yevette. Dont you see? If we had stayed, if we had gone through the prop er pro ce dure, maybe they would have re leased us with pa pers. Uh-?uh, Bug, uh-?uh. It dont work like dat. Not for pip ple from Ja maica, an not for pip ple from Nye-?Jir rya nei ther. Get dis in to yore head, dar lin: dere is on ly one place where de prop er pro ce dure ends, an dat is de-?por-?tay-?SHUN. She tapped the syl la bles out on my fore head with the palm of her hand, and then she smiled at me. If dey de port us, we gonna be killed when we get back home. Right? Dis way at leas we got a chance, dar lin, yu bet ter be lieve it. But we cant work if we are il le gal, Yevette. We cant earn mon ey. We cant live. Yevette shrugged. Yu cant live if yu dead, nei ther. Yu prob ly too smart to get dat. I sighed and I shook my head. Yevette grinned. Dats what I like to see, she said. A young ting like yu be ing rill-?is tic. Now, lis sen. Yu tink dese En glish peo ple yu know could help us? I looked down at the driv ers li cense. I do not know. But yu dont know no one else, huh? No. An what we gonna do when we get dere, if I come wid yu? I dont know. Maybe we could find work, some where where they do not ask us for pa pers. Easy fo yu. Yu smart, yu talk nice. Plen ty work fo a girl like yu. You talk nice too, Yevette. Me talk like a ooman who swal lowed a ooman who talk nice. Me dumb, yu nuh see it? You are not dumb, Ye Cevette. All of us who have got this far, all of us who have sur vived how can we be dumb? Dumb could not come this far, I am telling you. Yevette leaned in to ward me and whis pered. Are you sir ius? Yu no see de way Sari Girl start gig glin at dat taxi back dere? Okay. Maybe Sari Girl is not very clever. But she is pret ti er than all of us. Yevette made her eyes big and snatched her see-?though bag clos er to her body. Dat hurts, Bug. How dare yu say she de pret ti est? Me was gonna share me pineap ple slice wid yu, but now yu on ya own, dar lin. I gig gled, and Yevette smiled and rubbed the top of my head. Then we turned around very fast



be cause there was a scream from the girl with no name. She was stand ing on her bed and she held her bag of documents against her chest with both hands, and she start ed to scream again. Make them stop com ing! They will kill us all, you girls do not un der stand! Yevette stood up and walked over to her. She looked up at the girl with no name. The hens pecked and clucked around Yevettes flip-?flops. Lis sen dar lin. Dese aint mens com min to kill yu, I tole yu be fore. Dese is chick ens. Dey is more scared of us dan we is of dem. Look yu! Yevette put her head down and ran in to a group of hens. There was a great ex plo sion of flap ping wings and fly ing feath ers, and the hens were jump ing up on to the mat tress es, and the girl with no name was scream ing and scream ing and kick ing at the hens with her Dun lop Green Flash train ers. Sud den ly she stopped scream ing and point ed. I could not see where she was point ing be cause there were hen feath ers ev ery where, falling down in the bright beams of sunshine from the sky lights. Her point ing fin ger was trem bling and she was whis per ing, Look! Look! My child! All of us girls were look ing, but when the feath ers fin ished falling there was noth ing there. The girl with no name, she was just smil ing at a bright beam of sun light on the clean gray-?paint ed floor. There were tears falling from her eyes. My child, she said, and she held her arms out stretched to ward the beam of light. I watched her fin gers trem bling. I looked at Yevette and the sari girl. The sari girl looked down at the floor. Yevette shrugged at me. I looked back at the girl with no name and I spoke to her. What is your childs name? The girl with no name smiled. Her face shone. This is Aabi rah. She is my youngest. Isnt she beau ti ful? I looked at the place she was look ing. Yes. She is love ly. I looked at Yevette and made my eyes wide at her. Isnt she love ly, Yevette? Oh. Yeah. Sure. She a rill heart brek ka. What yu say yu call in her? Aabi rah. Dats nice. Lis sen, Aa-?BI-?rah, why dont yu come wid me, an help me chase de fowls out ta dis barn? And so Yevette and the sari girl and the youngest daugh ter of the girl with no name, they start ed chas ing the hens out of the build ing. Me, I sat and held the hand of the girl with no name. I said, Your daugh ter is very help ful. Look how she chas es those hens. The girl with no name, she was smil ing. I was smiling too. I think it was nice for both of us that she had her daugh ter back. If I was telling this sto ry to the girls from back home, then one of the new words I would have to ex plain to them is ef fi cien cy. We refugees are very ef ficient. We do not have the things we needour chil dren, for ex am pleand so we are clever at mak ing things stretch a lit tle fur ther. Just see what that girl with no name could make out of one lit tle patch of sun light. Or look how the sari girl could fit the en tire col or of yel low in to one emp ty see-?through plas tic bag. I lay back on the bed and looked up at the chains. I was think ing, That sun shine, that col or yel low, maybe I will not see very much of these now. Maybe the new col or of my life was gray. Two years in the gray de ten tion cen ter, and now I was an il le gal im mi grant. That means, you are free un til they catch you. That means, you live in a gray area. I thought about how I was go ing to live. I thought about the years, liv ing as qui et as could be. Hid ing my col ors and liv ing in the twi light and the shad ows. I sighed, and I tried to breathe deeply. I want ed to cry when I looked up at those chains and thought about the col or gray. I was think ing, if the head of the Unit ed Na tions tele phoned one morn ing and said, Greet ings, Lit tle Bee, to you falls the great hon or of de sign ing a na tional flag for all the worlds refugees, then the flag I would make would be gray. You would not need any par tic ular fab ric to make it. I would say that the flag could be any shape and it could be made with any thing you had. A worn-?out old brassiere, for ex am ple, that has been washed so many times it has be come gray. You could fly it on the end of a broom han dle, if you did not have a flag pole. Al though if you did have a spare flag pole, for ex am ple in that line of tall white flag poles out side the Unit ed Na tions build ing in New York City, then I think that old gray brassiere would make a fine spec ta cle, fly ing in the long color ful line of flags. I would fly it be tween the Stars and Stripes and the big red Chi nese flag. That would be a good trick. Think ing about this, I made my self laugh. What de hell you laugh in at, Bug? I was think ing about the col or gray. Yevette frowned. Dont yu go crazy too please, Bug, she said. I lay back on the bed and I looked up to the ceil ing, but all that was there were those long chains dan gling down. I thought, I could hang my self by the neck from those, no prob lem. In the af ter noon the farmers wife came. She brought food. There was bread and cheese in a bas ket, and a sharp knife to cut the bread with. I thought, I can cut open my veins with that knife, if the men come. The farmers wife was a kind wom an. I asked her why was she do ing this good thing for us. She said it was be cause we were all hu man be ings. I said, Ex cuse me miss but I do not think Yevette is a hu man be ing. I think she is an oth er specie Canos with a loud er mouth. Yevette and the farmers wife start ed laugh ing then, and we talked for a lit tle while about where we had all come from and where we were going to. She told me the di rec tion to go to Kingston-?up on-?Thames, but she al so told me that I shouldnt. You dont want to go to the sub urbs, dear, she said. Nei ther fish nor flesh, the sub urbs. Un nat ural places, full of un nat ural peo ple. I laughed. I told her, Maybe I will fit

right in. The farmers wife was surprised when we asked for five plates instead of four, but she brought them any way. We divided the food into five portions, and we gave the biggest helping to the daughter of the woman with no name, because she was still growing. That night I dreamed about my village before the men came. There was a swing that the boys had made. It was the old tire of a car, and the boys had tied ropes around it and suspended it from the high branch of a tree. This was a big old limba tree and it grew a little way apart from our homes, near to the school house. Even before I was big enough to go on the swing, my mother would sit me down in the dark red dust by the trunk of the limba so I could watch the big children swinging. I loved to listen to them laughing and singing. Two, three, four children at once, all ways up, with legs and arms and heads all tangled up and dragging in the red scrape of dust at the lowest point of the swing. Aie! Ouch! Get off me in the name of god! Do not push! There was always a lot of chatter and joking around the swing, and up above my head in the branches of the limba tree there were grumpy horn bills that shouted back at us. Nkiruka would get down from the swing some times and pick me up in her arms and give me little pieces of soft uncooked dough to squeeze between my chubby fingers. Everything was happiness and singing when I was a little girl. There was plenty of time for it. We did not have hurry. We did not have electricity or fresh water or sadness either, because none of these had been connected to our village yet. I sat in between the roots of my limba tree and I laughed while I watched Nkiruka swinging back and fro, back and fro. The tether of the swing was very long, so it took a long time for her to travel from one end of its swing to the other. It never looked like it was in a rush, that swing. I used to watch it all day long and I never realized I was watching a pendulum counting down the last seasons of peace in my village. In my dream I watched that tire swinging back and fro, back and fro, in that village we did not yet know was built on an oil field and would soon be fought over by men in a crazy hurry to drill down into the oil. This is the trouble with all happiness all of it is built on top of something that men want. I dreamed of watching Nkiruka swinging back and fro, back and fro, and when I woke up there were tears in my eyes and in the light of the moon I was watching something else swinging back and fro, back and fro. I could not tell what it was. I wiped the tears from my eyes and I opened them fully, and then I saw what it was that was swinging through the air at the end of my bed. It was a single Dunlop Green Flash train er. The other one had fallen off the foot of the woman with no name. She had hanged herself from one of the long chains that reached up to the roof. Her body was naked apart from that one shoe. She was very thin. Her ribs and her hip bones were sharp. Her eyes bulged open and pointed up into thin blue light. They glittered. The chain had crushed her neck as thin as her ankle. I watched the Dunlop Green Flash train er and the bare dark brown foot with its gray sole, swinging back and forth past the end of my bed. The Green Flash train er glowed in the moon light, like a slow and shining silver fish, and the bare foot chased it like a shark. They swum circles around one another. The chain squeaked quietly. I went and touched the bare leg of the girl with no name. It was cold. I looked over at Yvette and the sari girl. They were sleeping. Yvette was muttering in her sleep. I started to walk over to Yvettes bed to wake her, but my foot slipped on something wet. I knelt down and touched it. It was urine. It was as cold as the painted concrete floor. A puddle of it had collected underneath the girl with no name. I looked up and I saw a single drop of urine hang from the big toe of her bare foot, then sparkle as it fell to the floor. I stood up quickly. I felt so depressed about the urine. I did not want to wake up the other girls because then they would see it too, and then we would all be seeing it, and then none of us could deny it. I do not know why the small puddle of urine made me start to cry. I do not know why the mind chooses these small things to break itself on. I went over to the bed that the girl with no name had been sleeping on, and I picked up her T-shirt. I was going to go back and use the T-shirt to wipe up the urine, but then I saw the see-through plastic bag of documents on the end of the bed. I opened it and I started to read the story of the girl with no name. The men came and they That was how all of our stories started. I was still crying, and it was difficult to read in the dim light from the moon. I put the girls documents back down on the bed and I closed the bag carefully. I held it tightly in my hands. I was thinking, I could take this girls story for my own. I could take these documents and I could take this story with its official red stamp at the end of it that tells every one it is TRUE. Maybe I can win my asylum case with these papers. I thought about it for one minute, but while I held the girls story in my hands the squeaking of her chain seemed to get louder, and I had to drop her story back down on the bed because I knew how it ended. A story is a powerful thing in my country, and God help the girl who takes one that is not her own. So I left it on the girls bed, every word of it, including the paper clips and all the photographs of the scar tissue and the names of the missing daughters, and all of the red ink that said this was CONFIRMED. Me, I put one small kiss on the cheek of

Yevette, who was still sleep ing, and I walked off qui et ly across the fields. Leav ing Yevette, that was the hard est thing I had to do since I left my vil lage. But if you are a refugee, when death comes you do not stay for one minute in the place it has vis it ed. Many things ar rive af ter deathsad ness, ques tions, and po lice menand none of these can be an swered when your pa pers are not in or der. Tru ly, there is no flag for us float ing peo ple. We are mil lions, but we are not a na tion. We can not stay to geth er. Maybe we get to geth er in ones and twos, for a day or a month or even a year, but then the wind changes and car ries the hope away. Death came and I left in fear. Now all I have is my shame and the mem ory of bright col ors and the echo of Yevettes laugh. Some times I feel as lone ly as the Queen of Eng land. It was not dif fi cult to know which way to go. Lon don lit up the sky. The clouds glowed or ange, as if the city that await ed me was burn ing. I walked uphill, through fields with some kind of grain and in to a high wood of some kind of trees, and when I looked back down to ward the farm for Cd t the last time, I saw a flood light come on out side the barn they put us in. I think it was an au to mat ic light, and stand ing in the mid dle of the beam there was the sin gle bright lemon-?yel low dot of the sari girl. It was too far away to see her face, but I imag ined her blink ing in sur prise when the light came on. Like an ac tress who has walked on to the stage by mis take. Like a girl who does not have a speak ing part, who is think ing, Why have they turned this great light up on me now? I was very scared but I did not feel alone. All through that night it seemed to me as if my big sis ter Nkiru ka walked be side me. I could al most see her face, glow ing in the pale or ange light. We walked all night, across fields and through woods. We steered around the lights of vil lages. When ev er we saw a farm house we went around that too. Once, the farm dogs heard us and barked, but there was no trou ble. We kept on walk ing. My legs were tired. Two years I had been in that de ten tion cen ter, go ing nowhere, and I was weak. But al though my an kles hurt and the backs of my legs ached, it felt very good to be mov ing, and to be free, and to feel the night air on my face and the grass on my legs, wet from the dew. I know my sis ter was hap py too. She was whistling un der her breath. Once when we stopped to rest, she dug her toes in to the earth at the edge of a field and smiled. When I saw her smile, I felt strong enough to car ry on. The or ange glow of the night fad ed, and I start ed to see the fields and the hedges around us. Ev ery thing was gray at first, but then the col ors be gan to come in to the landblue and green, but very soft, as if the col ors did not have any hap pi ness in them. Then the sun rose, and the whole world turned to gold. The gold was all around me and I was walk ing through clouds of it. The sun was blaz ing on the white mist that hung over the fields, and the mist swirled around my legs. I looked over at my sis ter, but she had dis ap peared with the night. I smiled though, be cause I re al ized that she had left me with her strength. I looked around me at the beau ti ful sun rise and I was think ing, Yes, yes, ev ery thing will be beau ti ful like this now. I will nev er be afraid again. I will nev er spend an oth er day trapped in the col or gray. There was a low roar ing, rum bling sound ahead of me. The noise rose and fell in the mist. It is a wa ter fall, I thought. I must be care ful not to fall in to the riv er in this mist. I walked on, more care ful ly now, and the noise got loud er. Now it did not sound like a riv er any more. There were in di vid ual sounds in the mid dle of the roar ing. Each sound got loud er, rum bling and shak ing and then fad ing away. There was a dirty, sharp smell in the air. Now I could hear the sound of cars and trucks. I went clos er. I came to the top of a green grass slope and there it was in front of me. The road was in cred ible. On my side of it there were three lines of traf fic go ing from right to left. Then there was a low met al bar ri er, and an oth er three lines of traf fic go ing from left to right. The cars and the trucks were mov ing very fast. I walked down to the edge of the road and put out my hand to stop the traf fic, so I could cross, but the traf fic did not stop. A truck blew its horn at me, and I had to step back. I wait ed for a gap in the traf fic and then I ran across to the cen ter of the road. I climbed over the met al bar ri er. This time a great many car horns were blown at me. I ran across, and up the green grass bank at the oth er side of the road. I sat down. I was out of breath. I watched the traf fic rac ing past be low me, three lines in one di rec tion and three lines in the oth er. If I was telling this sto ry to the girls from back home they would be say ing, Okay, it was the mornin Cwasg, so the peo ple were trav el ing to work in the fields. But why do the peo ple who are driv ing from right to left not ex change their fields with the peo ple who are driv ing from left to right? That way ev ery one could work in the fields near to their homes. And then I would just shrug be cause there are no an swers that would not lead to more fool ish ques tions, like What is an of fice and what crops can you grow in it? I just fixed the mo tor way in my mind as a place I could run back to and kill my self very eas ily if the men sud den ly came, and then I stood up and car ried on go ing. I walked for an oth er hour across fields. Then I came to some small roads, and these roads had hous es on them. I was amazed when I saw them. They were two sto ries high and made out of strong red bricks. They had slop ing roofs with neat rows of tiles on them. They had white win

dows, and there was glass in all of them. Noth ing was bro ken. All the hous es were very smart, and each one looked like the next. In front of near ly ev ery house there was a car. I walked along the street and I stared at the shin ing rows of them. These were beau ti ful cars, sleek and shin ing, not the kind of ve hi cles we saw where I came from. In my vil lage there were two cars, one Peu geot and one Mer cedes. The Peu geot came be fore I was born. I know this be cause the driv er was my fa ther, and my vil lage was the place where his Peu geot coughed twice and died in the red dust. He went in to the first house in the vil lage to ask if they had a me chan ic. They did not have a me chan ic but what they did have was my moth er, and my fa ther re al ized he need ed her more than he need ed a me chan ic in any case, and so he stayed. The Mer cedes ar rived when I was five years old. The driv er was drunk, and he crashed in to my fa thers Peu geot, which was still stand ing ex act ly how my fa ther had left it ex cept that the boys had tak en one of its tires away to use as the seat of the swing on the lim ba tree. The driv er of the Mer cedes got out and he walked over to the first house and met my fa ther there and he said, Sor ry. And my fa ther smiled at him and said, We should be thank ing you, sir, you have re al ly put our vil lage on the map, this is our very first road traf fic ac ci dent. And the driv er of that Mer cedes, he laughed, and he stayed too, and he be came great friends with my fa ther, so much that I called him my un cle. And my fa ther and my un cle lived very hap pi ly in that place un til the af ter noon when the men came and shot them. So, it was as ton ish ing to see all these new, beau ti ful shin ing cars parked out side these big, per fect hous es. I walked through many streets like this. I walked all morn ing. The build ings got big ger and heav ier. The streets got wider and bus ier. I stared at ev ery thing, and I did not mind the hunger in my stom ach or the aching in my legs be cause I was amazed by each new won der. Each time I saw some thing for the first time a near ly naked girl on an ad vertis ing bill board, or a red dou ble-deck er bus, or a glit ter ing build ing so tall it made you dizzy the ex cite ment in my stom ach was so fierce it hurt. The noise was too much the roar of the traf fic and the shout ing. Soon there were such crowds on the streets that it seemed I was noth ing. I was pushed and bumped all over the pave ments, and no one took any no tice of me. I kept on walk ing as straight as I could, fol low ing one street and then an oth er, and just as the build ings got so big it seemed they could not pos si bly stand up, and the noise got so loud it seemed as if my body would be shak en to pieces, I turned a corner and I gasped and ran across one last busy road, with car horns blast ing and the drivers scream ing, and I leaned over a low white stone wall and stared and stared, be cause there in front of me was the Riv er Thames. Boats were push ing along through the mud dy brown wat Cud der, honk ing their horns un der the bridges. All along the riv er to the left and the right, there were huge tow ers that rose high in to the blue sky. Some were still be ing built, with huge yel low cranes mov ing above them. They even trained the birds of the air to help them build? Weh! I stayed there on the bank of the riv er and I stared and stared at these mar vels. The sun shone out of the bright blue sky. It was warm, and a soft breeze blew along the bank of the riv er. I whis pered to my sis ter Nkiru ka, be cause it seemed to me that she was there in the flow ing of the riv er and the blow ing of the breeze. Look at this place, sis ter. We are go ing to be all right here. There will be room for two girls like us in a coun try as fine as this. We are not go ing to suf fer any more. I smiled, and I walked away down the em bank ment of the riv er, in the di rec tion of the west. I knew that if I fol lowed along the bank, I would get to Kingston that is why they call it Kingston-up on-Thames. I want ed to get there as quick as I could, be cause now the crowds in Lon don were start ing to fright en me. In my vil lage we nev er saw more than fifty peo ple in one place. If you ev er saw more than that, it meant that you had died and gone to the city of the spir its. That is where the dead go, to a city, to live to geth er in their thou sands be cause they do not need the space to grow their fields of cas sa va. When you are dead you are not hun gry for cas sa va, on ly for com pa ny. A mil lion peo ple were all around me. Their faces hur ried past. I looked and looked. I nev er saw the faces of my fam ily but when you have lost ev ery one, you nev er lose the habit of look ing. My sis ter, my moth er, my fa ther and my un cle. Ev ery face I see, I am look ing for them in it. If I did meet you then the first thing you would have no ticed would have been my eyes star ing at your face, as if they were try ing to see some one else in you, as if they were des per ate to make you in to a ghost. If we did meet, I hope you did not take this per son al ly. I hurried along the river embankment, through the crowds, ...

If I was telling this sto ry to the girls from back home, I would have to ex plain to them how it was pos si ble to be drown ing in a riv er of peo ple and al so to feel so very, very alone. But tru ly, I do not think I would have the words. Four EAR LY ON THE MORN ING of An drews fu ner al, be fore Lit tle Bee ar rived, I re mem ber look ing down from the bed room win dow of our house in Kingston-up on-Thames. Out by the

pond, Bat man was pok ing at bad dies with a plas tic ju nior golf club, look ing skin ny and for lorn. I won dered if I should warm up some milk and make him a cup of some thing. I re mem ber won der ing if there was any thing that could be put in to a cup that would ac tu al ly be of prac ti cal help. My mind was set in that crys talline, self-?con scious state that comes with lack of sleep. Be yond our gar den I could see the whole streets back gar dens, curv ing away like a bent green spine, with bar be cues and fad ed plas tic swings for ver tebrae. Through the dou ble glaz ing came the bray ing of a car alar Fm and the drone of planes climb ing out of Heathrow. I pressed my nose against the glass and I thought: these bloody sub urbs are pur ga to ry. How did we all wash up here? How did so many of us end up so very far down wind? In the gar den next door, on that morn ing of the fu ner al, my neigh bor was hang ing out his blue Y-?fronts to dry. His cat was curl ing around his legs. In my bed room the To day Pro gramme was on the ra dio. John Humphrys said the FTSE was rather bad ly down. Yes, but I have lost my hus band. I said it out loud, while a trapped fly flew fee bly at the win dow pane. I said: My hus band is dead, Im afraid. My husband, An drew ORourke, the cel ebrat ed colum nist, has tak en his own life. And I feel Ac tu al ly I didnt know how I felt. We dont have a grown-?up lan guage for grief. Day time shows do it much bet ter. I knew I ought to feel dev as tat ed, of course. My life had fall en apart. Isnt that the phrase? But An drew had been dead near ly a whole week now and here I still was, dry-?eyed, with the whole house reek ing of gin and lilies. Still try ing to feel ap pro pri ate ly sad. Still drilling down through the mem ories of my short, mixed life with poor An drew. Search ing for the cap stone, the mem ory which when cracked would re lease some symp tom of an guish. Tears, per haps, un der un be liev able pres sure. All of this would have been eas ier on day time TV: My life en tered a vi cious down hill spi ral, Tr isha. I couldnt imag ine get ting through the day with out him. It was ex haust ing, prospect ing for grief like this, un sure if grief was even there to be found. Per haps it was just too soon. For the mo ment I felt more pity for a trapped fly that buzzed against the win dow. I opened the latch and out it flew, vul ner able and weak, back in the game. On the oth er side of the glass, the day smelled of sum mer. My neigh bor had shuf fled along his wash ing line, three feet to the left. Hed fin ished peg ging Y-?fronts. Now he was on to socks. His wash ing hung like prayer flags, pe ti tion ing day time gods: I seem to have moved to the sub urbs, Im afraid. Can any thing be done? A thought of es cape pre sent ed it self, ras cal ish and unan nounced. I could sim ply leave, right now, couldnt I? I could take Char lie, my cred it card and my fa vorite pink shoes and we could all get on a plane to geth er. The house and the job and the grief would all shrink to a point be hind me. I re mem ber re al iz ing, with a guilty thrill, that there was no longer one sin gle rea son for me to be herefar from the cen ter of my heart, cast away here in its sub urbs. But life is not in clined to let any of us es cape. That was the mo ment I heard a knock at the door. I opened the door to Lit tle Bee, and for the longest time I sim ply stared at her. Nei ther of us spoke. Af ter a few mo ments I let her in and I sat her down on the so fa. Black girl in a red-?and-?white Hawai ian shirt, stained by the Sur rey clay. So fa from Habi tat. Mem ories from hell. I dont know what to say. I thought you must be dead. I am not dead, Sarah. Maybe it would be bet ter if I was. Dont say that. You look very tired. You need some rest, I should think. There was a si lence that went on too long. Yes. You are right. I need some rest. How on earth did youI mean, how did you sur vive? How did you get here? I walked. From Nige ria? Please. I am very tired. Oh. Yes. Of course. Yes. Would you like a cup of, you know I didnt wait for the an swer. I fled. I left Lit tle Bee sit ting on the so fa, propped up on the John Lewis cush ions, and I ran up stairs. I closed my eyes and rolled my fore head against the cool glass of the bed room win dow. I di aled some one. A friend. More than a friend, ac tu al ly. Thats what Lawrence was. What is it? said Lawrence. You sound cross. Oh. Sarah. Its you. God Im sor ry. I thought you were the nan ny. Shes late. And the ba bys just been sick on my tie. Shit. Some things hap pened, Lawrence. What? Some ones turned up I re al ly wasnt ex pect ing. Fu ner als are al ways like that. All the old skele tons come the atri cal ly out of their clos ets. You cant keep the bas tards away. Yes of course, but this is more than that. Its, its I stam mered away and fell silent. Sor ry Sarah, I know this sounds aw ful, but Im in a ter ri ble rush here. Is it some thing I can ac tu al ly help with? I pressed my flushed face against the cold glass. Sor ry. Im a bit con fused. Its the fu ner al. Youre go ing to feel a bit scat ty, arent you? Im sor ry, but theres no way around that. I wish youd let me come. How are you feel ing about it all? About the fu ner al? About the whole sit ua tion. I sighed. I dont feel any thing. I feel numb. Oh Sarah. Im just wait ing for the un der tak er now. Im slight ly ner vous, maybe. Thats all. Like wait ing at the den tists. Right, said Lawrence, care ful ly. A pause. In the back ground, the sound of Lawrences chil dren squab bling at the break fast ta ble. I re al ized I couldnt tell Lawrence about Lit tle Bee turning up. Not now. It sud den ly didnt seem fair, to add it to his list of prob lems. Late for work, ba by sick on tie, tardy nan nyoh, and now a pre sumed-?dead Nige ri an girl, res ur rect ed on

his mis tresss so fa. I didnt think I could do that to him. Be cause this K Beis the thing, with be ing lovers. It isnt like be ing married. To re main in the game, one has to be con sid er ate. One has to ac knowl edge a cer tain right-to-life of the oth er. So I stayed silent. I lis tened to Lawrence tak ing a deep breath, on the edge of ex as per a tion. So whats con fus ing you? Is it that youre not feel ing any thing much and you think you should be? Its my hus bands fu ner al. I should be sad, at least. Youre in con trol of your self. Youre not a gush er. Cel ebrate that. I cant cry for An drew. I keep think ing about that day in Africa. On the beach. Sarah? Yes? I thought we agreed it was best that you for get all that. What hap pened, hap pened. We agreed that you were just go ing to move on, didnt we. Hmm? I pressed my left hand flat against the win dow pane and stared at the stump of my lost fin ger. I dont think mov ing on is go ing to work any more, Lawrence. I dont think I can just con tin ue to de ny what hap pened. I dont think Ill be able to. I My voice trailed off. Sarah? Deep breaths. I opened my eyes. Out side, Bat man was still pok ing fierce ly at the pond. The To day Pro gramme scold ed away on the ra dio. Next door the neigh bor had fin ished peg ging his wash ing and now he sim ply stood there, eyes half-closed. Soon he would move on to a new task: the per co la tion of cof fee, per haps, or the ap pli ca tion of re place ment twine to the spool of a string trim mer. Small prob lems. Neat prob lems. Now that An draws, well, gone, Lawrence. Do you think you and I will be A pause on the oth er end of the phone. Then Lawrencecare ful Lawrencenon com mit tal. An drew didnt stop us while he was alive, he said. Do you see any rea son to change things now? I sighed again. Sarah? Yes? Just fo cus on to day for now, will you? Fo cus on the fu ner al, hold it to geth er, get through to day. Stop smear ing that fuck ing toast on the com put er! Lawrence? Sor ry. That was the ba by. Hes got a piece of but tered toast and hes wip ing it all oversor ry, have to go. Lawrence hung up. I turned from the win dow and sat on the bed. I wait ed. I was putting off hav ing to go down stairs and deal with Lit tle Bee. In stead of mov ing I watched my self, in the mir ror, as a wid ow. I tried to find some phys ical sign of An draws pass ing. No ex tra line on the fore head? No dark en ing of the skin un der the eyes? Re al ly? Noth ing? How calm my eyes were, since that day on the beach in Africa. When there has been a loss so f Ken un da men tal I sup pose that to lose just one more thinga fin ger, per haps, or a hus bandis of ab so lute ly no con se quence at all. In the mir ror my green eyes were placidas still as a body of wa ter that is either very deep, or very shal low. Why couldnt I cry? Soon I would have to go and face a church full of mourn ers. I rubbed my eyes, hard er than our beau ty ex perts ad vise. I need ed to show red eyes to the mourn ers, at least. I need ed to show them that I had cared for An drew, tru ly cared for him. Even if, since Africa, I hadnt re al ly bought the idea of love as a per ma nent thing, mea sur able in self-ad min is tered sur veys, present if you an swered most ly B. So I gouged my thumbs in to the skin beneath my lash es. If I couldnt show the world grief, at least I would show the world what it did to your eyes. Fi nal ly I went down stairs and stared at Lit tle Bee. She was still sit ting there on the so fa, her eyes closed, her head propped on the cush ions. I coughed, and she snapped awake. Brown eyes, or ange pat terned silk cush ions. She blinked at me and I stared at her, with the mud still cak ing her train ers. I felt nothing. Why did you come here? I said. I did not have any oth er place to go. The on ly peo ple I know in this coun try are you and An drew. You hard ly know us. We met, thats all. Lit tle Bee shrugged. You and An drew are the on ly ones I met, she said. An drew is dead. We are go ing to bury him this morn ing. Lit tle Bee just blinked at me, glazed ly. Do you un der stand? I said. My hus band died. We are go ing to have a fu ner al. Its a kind of cer emo ny. In a church. Its what we do in this coun try. Lit tle Bee nod ded. I know what you do in this coun try, she said. There was some thing in her voiceso old, so tiredthat ter ri fied me. That was when the door knock er sound ed again and Char lie an swered the door to the un der tak er and called down the hall way, Mum my, its Bruce Wayne! Run out and play in the gar den, dar ling. But Mum my! I want to see Bruce Wayne. Please, dar ling. Just go. When I came to the door, the un der tak er glanced at the stump of my fin ger. Peo ple gen er al ly do, but rarely with that pro fes sion al gaze that notes: Left hand, sec ond fin ger, first and sec ond pha lanx, yes, we could fix that with a wax pros thetic, a slen der one, with a light Cau casian flesh tone, and we could use Kry olan foun da tion to cov er the join, and we could fold the right hand over the left in the cof fin, and Bob would be your moth ers broth er, madam. I was think ing, Clever un der tak er. If on ly I was dead, you could make a whole wom an out of me. My deep est con do lences, madam. We are ready for you when ev er you feel ready to come. Thank you. Ill just get my son and mywell. My friend. I watched the un der tak er ig nor ing the smell of gin on my breath. He looked back at me. There was a small scar on his fore head. His nose was flat tened and skewed. His face reg is tered noth ing. It was as blank as my mind. Take all the time you need, madam. I went out in to the back gar den. Bat man was dig ging away at some thing un der the ros es. I went over to him. He had a trow el and he was lift ing a dan delion, pulling its

root to the tip. Our resident robin was hungry and he watched from six yards away. Batman raised the dandelion from the soil and brought it close to examine its root. Kneeling, he looked up at me. Is this a weed, Mum my? he said. Yes darling. Next time, if you're not sure, ask before you dig it up. Batman shrugged. Shall I put it in the wild patch? he said. I nodded, and Batman carried the dandelion over to a small part of the garden where Andrew had given a home to such rascals, in the hope that they would attract butterflies and bees. In our small garden I have made a wild place to remind me of chaos, Andrew once wrote in his column. Our modern lives are too ordered, too antiseptic. That had been before Africa. Batman bedded in the dandelion among the nettles. Mum my, is weeds bad dies? I said that it depended if you were a boy or a butterfly. Batman rolled his eyes, like a news man interviewing an equivocating politician. I couldn't help smiling. Who is that woman on the sofa, Mum my? Her name is Little Bee. That's a funny name. Not if you're a bee. But she isn't a bee. No. She's a person. She's from a country called Nigeria. Mmm. Is she a goody? I stood up straight. We have to go now darling, I said. The undertaker is here to collect us. Bruce Wayne? Yes. Is we going to the bat cave? Are we going to the bat cave. Are we? Sort of. Hmm. I am coming in a minute. I felt the perspiration starting on my back. I had on a gray woolen suit and a hat that was not black but a late-evening nod to it. It didn't scorn tradition, but nor had it entirely submitted to darkness. Folded up over the hat was a black veil, ready to bring down when the right moment came. I hoped someone would tell me when that was. I wore navy-blue gloves, which were borderline dark enough for a funeral. The middle finger of the left hand glove was truncated and stitched. I'd done it two nights earlier, as soon as I was drunk enough to bear it, in a merciful hour between sobriety and incapacity. The severed finger was still lying on my sewing table. It was hard to throw away. In my suit pocket was my phone, set to quiet mode in case I forgot to do it later. I also had a ten-pound note ready for the collection, in case there was a collection. It seemed unlikely at a funeral, but I wasn't sure. (And if there was a collection, was ten pounds about right? Five seemed ridiculously mean; twenty obscenely flashy.) There was no body left to ask about ordinary things. Little Bee was no use. I couldn't ask her: are these blue gloves okay? She'd only stare at them, as if they were the first pair of gloves she had ever seen, which was quite possibly the case. (Yes, but are they dark enough, Little Bee? Between you and me, you as the refugee from horror and me as the editor of an edgy monthly magazine, would we call that shade blue, courageous, or blue, irreverent?) Ordinary things were going to be the hardest, I realized. There was no body to ask about them. This was something undeniable, now that Andrew was gone: there was no body left with a strong opinion about life in a civilized country. Our robin hopped out from the foxgloves with a worm in its beak. The worm skin was puce, the color of bruising. Come on, Batman, we have to go. In a minute, Mum my. In the quiet of the garden then the robin shook his worm, and swallowed its life from the light into darkness with the quick difference of a god. I felt nothing at all. I looked at my son, pale and bemused in the neatly planted garden, and I looked past him at Little Bee, tired and mud-stained, waiting for us to go through in to the house. So, I realized life had finally broken through. How silly it looked now, my careful set of defenses against nature: my brazen magazine, my handsome husband, my Maginot Line of motherhood and affairs. The world, the real world, had found a way through. It had sat down on my sofa and it would not be denied any longer. I went through the house to the front door to tell the undertaker we would be with him in a minute. He nodded. I looked behind the undertaker at his men, pale and hungry in their coat tails. I have drunk gin myself in my time and I recognized that solemn expression they wore. One part pity, three parts ill-never-drink-again. The men nodded at me. It is a peculiar sensation, as a woman with a very good job, to be pitied by men with tattoos and headaches. It's the way people will always look at me now, I suppose, as a forerunner in this country of my heart I should never have come to. On the street in front of our house, the hearse and the limo stood waiting. I went out in to the driveway to look through the green glass of the hearse. Andrew's coffin was there, lying on bright chrome rollers. Andrew, my husband of eight years. I thought: I should feel something now. I thought: Rollers. How practical. On our street the semidetached houses stretched to infinity in both directions. The clouds scrolled across the sky, blandly oppressive, each one resembling the next, all threatening rain. I looked back at Andrew's coffin and I thought about his face. I thought about it dead. How slowly he had died, over those last two years. How imperceptible it had been, that transition in his facial expression, from deadly serious to seriously dead. Already those two faces were blurring together for me. My husband alive and my husband dead, they now seemed only semidetached, as if under the coffin lid I would find the two of them fused like Siamese twins, eyes agape, looking to infinity in both directions. And now this thought came in to my head with the full clarity of hor-

ror: An drew was once a pas sion ate, lov ing, bril liant man. Star ing at my hus bands cof fin, I clung to this thought. I held it up be fore my own mem ory like a ten ta tive flag of truce. I re mem bered An drew at the news pa per we both worked for when we met, hav ing a shout ing match with his ed itor over some lofty point of prin ci ple that got him glo ri ous ly fired, on the spot, and sent him strid ing fierce and beau ti ful in to the cor ri dor. The first time that I thought, This is a man to be proud of. And then An drew prac ti cal ly tripping over me eaves drop ping in the cor ri dor, open mouthed, pre tend ing I was walk ing past on my way to the news room. An drew grin ning at me, un hesi tat ingly, and say ing, Fan cy buy ing a for mer col league a spot of din ner? It was one in a bil lion. It was like catch ing light ning in a bot tle. The mar riage cooled when Char lie was born. As if that one light ning strike was all we got, and most of the heat from it had to go in to our child. Nige ria had ac cel er at ed the cool ing and now death had fin ished it, but my dis af fec tion and my af fair with Lawrence had come first. That was what my mind was stuck on, I re al ized. There was no quick grief for An drew be cause he had been so slow ly lost. First from my heart, then from my mind, and on ly fi nal ly from my life. This, then, was when re al sor row ar rived. This was the shock that set me trem bling, as if some thing seis mic had been re leased deep in side me and was blind ly inch ing to ward the sur face. I trem bled, but there was no re lease of tears. I went back in side the house, and col lect ed my son and Lit tle Bee. Mis matched, dazed, semide tached, we walked to my hus bands fu ner al. Still shak ing, in the pew, I un der stood that it isnt the dead we cry for. We cry for our selves, and I didnt de serve my own pity. Af ter it was all over, some one or oth er drove us home. I clung on to Char lie in the back seat of a car. I re mem ber the car smelled of stale cigarettes. I stroked Char lies head and point ed out the ev ery day things that we passed, in vok ing the com fort of hous es and shops and cars by the hope ful mag ic of whisper ing their names. Or di nary nouns were what we need ed, I de cid ed. Ev ery day things would get us through. Nev er mind that Char lies Bat man cos tume was cov ered in grave mud. When we got home I put it in the wash and I gave him the clean one. When it hurt too much to prize open the box of wash ing pow der, I used the oth er hand. I re mem ber sit ting with Char lie while we watched the wa ter flood in to the ma chine, ris ing be hind the round glass door. The ma chine lurched in to its fa miliar grind ing pream ble, and Char lie and I had a per fect ly or di nary con ver sa tion. That was the worst mo ment for me. We talked about what he want ed for lunch. Char lie said he want ed crisps. I de murred. He in sist ed. I ac qui esced. I was a pushover at that mo ment and my son knew it. I conc Knewed ed on toma to ketchup and ice cream too, and there was tri umph in Char lies face and hor ror in his eyes. There was ex traor di nary pain be hind the or di nary nouns. We ate, and then Lit tle Bee took Char lie out in to the gar den to play. I had been so fo cused on my son that I had for got ten all about her and it ac tu al ly sur prised me that she was still there. I sat very still at my kitchen ta ble. My moth er and my sis ter had come back with us from the church and they or bit ed me in a blur of fuss ing and tidy ing, so that if a pho to graph had been tak en of us all with a very long ex po sure it would have shown on ly me, in sharp fo cus, sur round ed by a ghost ly ha lo that took its azure col or from my sis ters cardi gan and its ec cen tric ity from my moth ers ten den cy to close in on me at one end of her or bit, and ask if I was all right. I hard ly heard her, I think. They car ried on around me for an hour, re spect ful of my si lence, wash ing the teacups with out un nec es sary clink, al pha bet izing con do lence cards whilst min imiz ing rus tle, un til I begged them, if they loved me, to go home. Af ter they left, with ten der, drawn-out hugs that made me re gret ban ish ing them, I sat back down at the kitchen ta ble and watched Lit tle Bee play ing in the gar den with Bat man. I sup pose it had been reck less of us to aban don our home and spend the whole morn ing at a fu ner al. In our ab sence some bad dies of the worst stripe had oc cu pied the lau rel bush, and now had to be flushed out with wa ter pis tols and bam boo canes. It seemed to be dan ger ous and painstak ing work. First Lit tle Bee would creep up to the lau rel on her hands and knees, with the hem of her over size Hawai ian shirt drag ging in the dirt. When she spot ted a lurk ing bad dy she would jab at him with a yell, caus ing him to break out in to the open. There my son was ready with the wa ter pis tol to de liv er the coup de grace. I mar veled at how quick ly they had be come a team. I wasnt sure I want ed them to be. But what was I to do? To stride out in to the garden and say, Lit tle Bee, could you please stop mak ing friends with my son? My son would loud ly de mand an ex pla na tion and it would be no use telling him that Lit tle Bee wasnt on our side. Not now that she and he had killed so many of those bad dies to geth er. No, it wasnt go ing to work any more, deny ing her, or deny ing what had hap pened in Africa. A mem ory can be ban ished, even in def inite ly, de port ed from con scious ness by the re lent less ev ery day ness of run ning a suc cess ful mag aazine, moth er ing a son, and bury ing a hus band. A hu man be ing, though, is a dif fer ent thing en tire ly. The ex is tence of a Nige ri an girl, alive and stand ing in ones own gar dengov ern ments may de ny such things, or brush them off as sta tis ti cal



anoma lies, but hu man be ings can not. I sat at the kitchen ta ble and stared through sud den ly wet eyes at the stump where my fin ger used to be. I re al ized that it was fi nal ly time to face up to what had hap pened on the beach. It should nev er have hap pened, of course, in the or di nary run of things. There are coun tries of the world, and re gions of ones own mind, where it is unwise to trav el. I have al ways thought so, and I have al ways struck my self as a sen si ble wom an. In de pen dent of mind, but not reck less ly so. I would love to have the same arms-?length re la tion ship with for eign places that oth er sen si ble wom en seem to have. Clever me, I went on hol iday some where dif fer ent. That sea son in Nige ria there was an oil war. An drew and I hadnt known. The strug gle was brief, con fused, and scarce ly re port ed. The British and Nige ri an gov ern ments both de ny to this day that it even took place. God knows, Ke. They arent the on ly ones who tried de nial. I still won der why it came in to my head to ac cept a hol iday in Nige ria. I wish I could claim it was the on ly tourist-?board free bie that ar rived at the magazine that spring, but we had box es full of themcrates of un opened en velopes hem or rhag ing sun screen from rup tured sam ple sa chets. I could have cho sen Tus cany, or Be lize. The for mer So vi et states were big that sea son. But no. The cussed streak in methe one that made me launch Nix ie in stead of join ing some tamer glossy; the one that made me start an af fair with Lawrence in stead of mend ing my fences with An drewthat en dur ing out ward-?bound streak gave me an ado les cent thrill when a pack age land ed on my desk em bla zoned with the ques tion FOR YOUR HOL IDAY THIS YEAR, WHY NOT TRY NIGE RIA? Some wag on my ed ito ri al staff had scrawled un der this, in black chunky mark er, the ob vi ous re sponse. But I was in trigued, and I opened the pack age. Out fell two open-?end ed air line tick ets and a ho tel reser va tion. It was as sim ple as turn ing up at the air port with a biki ni. An drew came with me, against his bet ter judg ment. The For eign Of fice were ad vis ing against trav el to some parts of Nige ria, but we didnt think that includ ed ours. He took some con vinc ing, but I re mind ed him that wed tak en our hon ey moon in Cu ba, and parts of that place were hor rif ic. An drew gave in. Look ing back on it now, I sup pose he thought he had no choice if he want ed to keep me. The tourist board that sent the free bies not ed that Ibeno Beach was an ad ven tur ous des ti na tion. Ac tu al ly, at the time we went, it was a cat aclysm with bor ders. To the north there was a malar ial jun gle and to the west a wide brown riv er delta. The riv er was iri des cent with oil. It was, I now know, bloat ed with the corpses of oil work ers. To the south was the At lantic Ocean. On that south ern edge I met a girl who was not my mag azines tar get read er. Lit tle Bee had fled south east on bleed ing feet from what had once been her vil lage and was short ly to be come an oil field. She fled from the men who would kill her because they were paid to, and the chil dren who would kill her be cause they were told to. I sat at my kitchen ta ble and I imag ined her flee ing through the fields and the jun gle, as fast as she could, un til she ar rived at the beach where An drew and I were be ing un con ven tion al. That beach was as far as she got. My miss ing fin ger itched, just think ing about it. When they came in from the gar den, I sent Bat man to play in his bat cave and I showed Lit tle Bee where the show er was. I found some clothes for her. Lat er, when Bat man was in bed, I made two G&Ts. Lit tle Bee sat and held hers, rat tling the ice cubes. I drank mine down like medicine. All right, I said. Im ready. Im ready for you to tell me what hap pened. You want to know how I sur vived? Start from the be gin ning, will you? Tell me how it was when you first reached the sea. So she told me how she hid, on the day she ar rived at the beach. She had been run ning for six days, trav el ing through the fields by night and hid ing in jungles and swamps when day break came. I turned off the ra dio in the kitchen, and I sat very qui et ly while she told me how she holed up in a salient of jun gle that grew right down to the sand. She lay there all through the hottest part of the day, watch ing the waves. She told me she hadnt seen the sea be fore, and she didn Kshe;t quite be lieve in it. In the late af ter noon Lit tle Bees sis ter, Nkiru ka, came down out of the jun gle and found her hid ing place. She sat down next to her. They hugged for a long time. They were hap py that Nkiru ka had man aged to fol low Lit tle Bees trail, but they were scared be cause it meant that oth ers could do it too. Nkiru ka looked in to her sis ters eyes and said that they must make up new names for them selves. It was not safe to use their true names, which spoke so loud ly of their tribe and of their re gion. Nkiru ka said her name was Kind ness now. Her younger sis ter want ed to re ply to Kind ness, but she could not think of a name for her self. The two sis ters wait ed. The shad ows were deep en ing. A pair of horn bills came to crack seeds in the trees above their heads. And thensit ting at my kitchen ta ble she said she re mem bered this so clear ly that she could al most reach out and stroke the fuzzy black back of the thinga bee blew in on the sea breeze and it land ed be tween the two sis ters. The bee was small and it touched down on a pale flow erfrangi pani, she told me, al though she said she wasnt sure about the Eu ro pean nameand then the bee flew off again, with out any fuss. She hadnt no ticed the flow er be fore the bee came, but now she saw that the flow er was

beau ti ful. She turned to Kind ness. My name is Lit tle Bee, she said. When she heard this name, Kind ness smiled. Lit tle Bee told me that her big sis ter was a very pret ty girl. She was the kind of girl the men said could make them for get their trou bles. She was the kind of girl the wom en said was trou ble. Lit tle Bee won dered which it was go ing to be. The two sis ters lay still and qui et till sun set. Then they crept down the sand to wash their feet in the surf. The salt stung in their cuts but they did not cry out. It was sen si ble of them to keep qui et. The men chas ing them might have giv en up, or they might not. The trou ble was, the sis ters had seen what had been done to their vil lage. There werent sup posed to be any sur vivors to tell the sto ry. The men were hunt ing down the flee ing wom en and chil dren and bury ing their bod ies un der branch es and rocks. Back un der cov er, the girls bound each oth ers feet in fresh green leaves and they wait ed for the dawn. It was not cold, but they hadnt eat en for two days. They shiv ered. Mon keys screamed un der the moon. I still think about the two sis ters there, shiv er ing through the night. While I watch them in my mind, again and again, small pink crabs fol low the thin smell of blood to the place where their feet re cent ly stood in the shore break, but they do not find any thing dead there yet. The soft pink crabs make hard lit tle click ing nois es un der the bright white stars. One by one, they dig them selves back in to the sand to wait. I wish my brain did not fill in the fright ful de tails like this. I wish I was a wom an who cared deeply about shoes and con ceal er. I wish I was not the sort of wom an who end ed up sit ting at her kitchen ta ble lis ten ing to a refugee girl talk ing about her aw ful fear of the dawn. The way Lit tle Bee told it, at sun rise there was a white mist hang ing thick in the jun gle and spilling out over the sand. The sis ters watched a white cou ple walk ing up the beach. The lan guage they spoke was the of fi cial lan guage of Lit tle Bees coun try, but these were the first whites she had seen. She and Kindness watched them from be hind a stand of palms. They drew back when the cou ple came lev el with their hid ing place. The whit Klaces stopped to look out at the sea. Lis ten to that surf, An drew, the white wom an said. Its so un be liev ably peace ful here. Im still a bit scared, frankly. We should go back in side the ho tel com pound. The white wom an smiled. Com pounds are made for step ping out side. I was scared of you, the first time I met you. Course you were. Big Irish hunk of love like me. Were sav ages, dont you know. Bar bar ians. Vagabonds. Cunts. Oh come on now, dear, thats just your moth er talk ing. The white wom an laughed, and pulled her self close to the mans body. She kissed him on the cheek. I love you, An drew. Im pleased we came away. Im so sor ry I let you down. It wont hap pen again. Re al ly? Re al ly. I dont love Lawrence. How could I? Lets make a fresh start, hmm? On the beach, the white man smiled. In the shad ows, Lit tle Bee cupped her hand over Kind nesss ear. She whis pered: What is a cunt? Kind ness looked back at her, and rolled her eyes. Right down there, girl, right close to your vagabond. Lit tle Bee bit her hand so she wouldnt gig gle. But then the sis ters heard dogs. They could hear ev ery thing, be cause there was a cool morn ing breeze, a land breeze that car ried all sounds. The dogs were still a long way off, but the sis ters heard them bark ing. Kind ness grabbed Lit tle Bees arm. Down on the beach, the white wom an looked up at the jungle. Oh lis ten, An drew, she said. Dogs! Prob ably the lo cal lads are hunt ing. Must be plen ty to catch in this jun gle. Still, I wouldnt have thought theyd use dogs. So what in the hell did you think theyd use? The white wom an shrugged. I dont know, she said. Ele phants? The white man laughed. You in suf fer able En glish, he said. The em pires still alive for you, isnt it? You on ly need to close your eyes. Now a sol dier came run ning up the beach from the di rec tion the white cou ple had come. He was pant ing. He wore olive-?green trousers and a light gray vest dark with sweat. He had mil itary boots on, and they were heavy with damp sand. He had a ri fle slung on his back, and the bar rel was swing ing at the sky. Oh for fucks sake, the white man said. Here comes that doo fus of a guard again. Hes on ly do ing his job. Yeah, but cant they let us do our own thing even for one minute? Kh="Oh, re lax. The hol iday was free, re mem ber? We were nev er go ing to have it all our own way. The guard came lev el with the white cou ple and he stopped. He was cough ing. He had his hands on his knees. Please, mis ter, mis sus, he said. Sor ry please to come back to ho tel com pound. But why? the white wom an said. We were just go ing for a walk along the beach. It is not safe mis sus, the guard said. Not safe for you and mis ter. Sor ry boss. But why? said the white man. What is ac tu al ly the prob lem? No prob lem, said the guard. Here is very good place. Very good. But all tourist must stay please in ho tel com pound. Un seen in the jun gle, the dogs were bark ing loud er now. The sis ters could hear the shouts of the men run ning with them. Kind ness was trem bling. The two sis ters held each oth er. Now one of the dogs howled and the oth ers joined in. In the hid ing place there was a splash ing on the dry leaves and a smell of urinethe re al ity of Kind nesss fear. Lit tle Bee looked in to her eyes. It didnt look as if her sis ter was even see ing her. Down on the beach the white man was say ing, Is this about mon ey? And the guard was say ing, No mis ter. The guard stood up straight and looked in to the jun gle where the noise of the

dogs was. He un slung his ri fle. Lit tle Bee saw the way he held it. He took the safe ty catch off and he reached down to check the mag azine. Two mag azinesI re mem ber that my selfbound back-?to-?back with blue in su la tion tape. The white man said, Oh dont give us the big per for mance. Just tell us how much you want. Come on. My wife is sick to the gills of be ing cooped up in that fuckin com pound. What will you take to let us go for a walk on our own? One dol lar? The guard shook his head. He wasnt look ing at the white man. He was watch ing a flock of red birds fly ing up from the jun gle, two hun dred yards away. No dol lar, the guard said. Ten dol lars, then, the white wom an said. Oh for the love of god, Sarah, the white man said. That is way too much. Thats a weeks wages here. Dont be such a tight-?ar se, the white wom an said. Whats ten dol lars to us? Its nice to be able to do some thing for these peo ple. God knows they have lit tle enough. Well, look then, five dol lars, the white man said. The guard was watch ing the tree tops. One hun dred and fifty yards away, up a shal low gul ly, the tips of the palm ferns were twitch ing. You come back with me now, the guard said. Ho tel com pound is best for you. Lis ten, the white man said. Im sor ry if we of fend ed you by of fer ing mon ey and I re spect you for not tak ing it. But I have my ed itor telling me whats best K&rs for me fifty-?one weeks of the year. I didnt come here to have any one ed it my hol iday. The guard lift ed the muz zle of his gun. He fired three shots in the air, just above the white mans head. The bark ing of the dogs and the yelling of the men stopped for a mo ment. Then they start ed up again, loud er. The white cou ple stood very still. Their mouths were open. They were struck, per haps, by the bullets that had missed them. Please, mis ter and mis sus, the guard said. Trou ble is come here. You do not know my coun try. The sis ters heard the thwack of ma chetes clear ing a path. Kind ness grabbed Lit tle Bees hand and pulled her to her feet. The two sis ters walked out of the cov er of the jun gle and on to the sand. Hold ing hands, they stood there look ing up at the white man and the white wom anAn drew, and mein hope and ex pec ta tion. I sup pose there was noth ing else in the de vel op ing world they could do. They stood on the sand, clutch ing each oth er, keep ing them selves up right on their fail ing legs. Kind ness strain ing her head to watch for the ap proach ing dogs, but Lit tle Bee look ing steadi ly at me, ig nor ing An drew, ig nor ing the guard. Please mis sus, she said, take us to the ho tel com pound with you. The guard looked at her, then he looked back up at the jun gle. He shook his head. Ho tel com pound is for tourist, he said. Not for you girls. Please, said Lit tle Bee, look ing di rect ly at me. Bad men are hunt ing us. They will kill us. She spoke to me as a wom an, know ing I would un der stand. But I didnt un der stand. Three days ear li er, just be fore we left for Heathrow, I had been stand ing on a bare con crete slab in our gar den, ask ing An drew ex act ly when the hell he planned to build his bloody glasshouse there. That was the biggest issue in my lifethat glasshouse, or the lack of it. That ab sent glasshouse, and all oth er struc tures past and fu ture that might help ful ly be erect ed in the larg er emo tion al ab sence be tween me and my hus band. I was a mod ern wom an and dis ap point ment was some thing I un der stood bet ter than fear. The hunters would kill her? My stom ach lurched, but my mind still as sert ed it was just a fig ure of speech. Oh for good ness sake, I said. Youre a child. Why would any one want to kill you? Lit tle Bee looked back at me and she said, Be cause we saw them killing ev ery one else. I opened my mouth but An drew spoke first. I think he was suf fer ing the same in tel lec tu al jet lag. As if our hearts had now ar rived on the beach but our minds were still hours be hind. An draws eyes were ter ri fied but his voice said, This is fuckin bull shit. This is a clas sic Nige ria scam. Come on, were go ing back to the ho tel. An drew start ed to pull me back along the beach. I went with him, twist ing my head to look back at the sis ters. The guard fol lowed be hind us. He walked back ward and aimed his gun at the jun gle. Lit tle Bee fol lowed with Kind ness, ten yards be hind. The guard said, You girls stop fol low ing us. He point ed his gun at the sis ters. They looked right back at him. The guard was sligh Kuar tly old er than the girls, maybe six teen or sev en teen, and he had a thin mus tache. I sup pose he was proud he could grow one. He had a green beret and there was sweat trick ling from un der it. I could see the veins in his tem ples. The whites of his eyes were yel low. Lit tle Bee said, What is your name, sol dier? And he said, My name is I will shoot if you dont stop fol low ing. Lit tle Bee shrugged and tapped her chest. My name is Lit tle Bee, she said. Here is my heart. Shoot here if you want. And Kind ness said, Bul lets is okay. Bul lets is quick. They kept on fol low ing us along the beach. The guards eyes went wide. Who is chas ing you girls? The same men who burned our vil lage. The oil com pa nys men. The ri fle be gan to shake in the guards hand. Christ je sus, he said. There were mens shouts and dogs bark ing, very loud now. I couldnt hear the surf any more. Five brown dogs came out of the jun gle, run ning. They were mad from howl ing. Their sides and their paws were bleed ing from the jun gle thorns. The sisters screamed and ran past the guard. The guard stopped and he lift ed his gun and he fired. The lead dog som er sault ed over in the sand. His ear was shot off and a piece of his head too, I think. The pack of

dogs skid ded and stopped and they tore in to the fallen dog. They were biting out chunks of the neck flesh while the back legs were still thrashing and twitching. I screamed. The guard was shaking. From out of the jungle, six men came running. They wore track suit trousers, all torn, and vests and running shoes, gold chains. They moved quickly up on us. They ignored the dogs. One was holding a bow, holding it drawn. The others were waving their machetes, daring the guard to shoot. They came right up to us. There was a leader. He had a wound in his neck. It was rotting I could smell it. I knew he was going to die soon. Another of the men wore a wire neck lace and it was strung with dried brown things that looked like mushrooms. When he saw Kindness, this man pointed at her, then he made circles on his nipples with his fingers and he grinned. I am trying to report this as matter-of-factly as I know how. The guard said, Keep walking, mister and missus. But the man with the neck wound the leader said, No, you stop. I will shoot, the guard said. But the man said, Maybe you will get one of us, maybe two. The man with the bow was aiming at the guard's neck, and he said, Maybe you get none of us. Maybe you should of shoot us when we was far away. The guard stopped walking backward, and we stopped too. Little Bee and Kindness went around behind us. They put me and my husband between themselves and the hunters. The hunters were passing around a bottle of something I thought was wine. They were taking turns to drink. The man with the bow and arrows was getting an erection. I could see it under his track suit trousers. But his expression didn't change and his eyes never moved from our guard's neck. He was wearing a black bandana. The bandana said EM PORIO AR MANI. I looked at Andrew. I tried to speak calmly, but the words were crushed in my throat. Andrew, I said. Please give them anything they want. Andrew looked at the man with the neck wound and he said, What do you want? The hunters looked at one another. The man with the neck wound stepped up to me. His eyes flickered, rolled up inside his head, then snapped back down and stared madly at me, the pupils tiny and the irises bullet-hard and gleaming like copper. His mouth twitched from a smile, to a grimace, to a cruel thin line, to a bitter and amused disdain. The emotions played across his face like a television flipped impatiently between channels. I smelled his sweat and his rot. He made a sound, an involuntary moan which seemed to surprise him his eyes went wide and he tore off my beach wrap. He looked down at the pale lilac material in his hands, curiously, and seemed to be wondering how it had got there. I screamed and clasped my arms over my breasts. I cringed away from the man, from the way he looked at me now patiently, as if encouraging a slow learner; now furiously; now with a pregnant, desperate calm. I was wearing a very small green bikini. I will say that again, and maybe I will be going to understand it myself. In the contested delta area of an African country in the middle of a three-way oil war, because there was a beach next to the war, because the state tourist board had merged tickets for that beach to every magazine listed in the Writers and Artists Yearbook, because it was that years cut, and because as editor I was first in the queue when distributors sent their own freebies to my magazines of fice, I was wearing a very small green bandeau bikini from Hermes. It occurred to me, as I stood there with my arms crossed over my tits, that I had freeloaned myself to an nihilation. The wounded man stepped so close to me that I felt the sand sink under my feet from his weight. He ran his finger over my shoulder, over my bare skin, and he said, What do we want? We want to practice our English. The hunters exploded in to laughter. They passed around the bottle again. For a moment, when one of them raised the bottle, I saw something with a pupil staring out of it. It was pressed up against the glass. Then the man put the bottle down, and the thing disappeared back in to the liquid. I say liquid because I didn't think it was wine any more. Andrew said, We have money, and we can get more later. The wounded man giggled and made a noise like a pig, which made him giggle more. Then his face set suddenly in to an expression of complete seriousness. He said, You give me what you got now. There is no later. Andrew took his wallet from his pocket. He passed it to the wounded man. The man took it this hand was shaking and he pulled out the banknotes and threw the wallet down on the sand. He passed the money behind him to the men, without looking or counting. He was breathing very heavily and there was sweat running down his face. His neck wound was wide open. It was green blue. It was obscene. I said, You need medical attention. We could get the Kleenex for you at the hotel. The man said, Medicine not fix what these girls have seen. These girls got to pay for what they seen. Give me the girls. I said, No. The wounded man looked at me, as-tonished. What you say? I said no. These girls are coming with us to the compound. If you try to stop them, our guard will shoot you. The wounded man widened his eyes in an indulgent simulacrum of fear. He put both his hands on the top of his head and turned himself through two shuffling circles on the sand. When he faced me again he grinned and said, Where are you from, missus? We live in Kingston, I said. The man cocked his head and looked in terestedly at me. Kingston-up

on-?Thames, I said. Its in Lon don. The man nod ded. I know where Kingston is, he said. I stud ied me chan ical en gi neer ing there. He looked down at the sand. He stood in si lence for a mo ment. Then he moved, and it was very quick. I saw his ma chete go up, I saw the blade flash in the ris ing sun, I saw a tiny flinch that was all the guard had time for. The blade went in to the guards throat and it rang. It rang when it struck the bones of the neck. The met al was still ring ing when the man yanked it out and the guard dropped in to the sand. The blade rang, I re mem ber, as if the ma chete was a bell and the guards life was the clap per. The killer said, You ev er hear a noise like that in Kingston-?up on-?Thames? There seemed to be more blood than one skin ny African boy could pos si bly have had in side him. It went on and on. That guard ly ing there with sand cov er ing his eye balls and his neck gap ing, as if it was hang ing on a hinge, wide open. It looked like a mouth. This very calm, mid dle-?class voice in my head said: Pac-?Man. Pac-?Man. Oh gosh, he looks just like Pac-?Man. We all stood in si lence as we watched the guard bleed to death. It took the longest time. I re mem ber think ing, Thank god we left Char lie with my par ents. When I lift ed my head, the killer was watch ing me. It wasnt a mean ex pres sion. I have seen check out girls look at me like that when I for get my re ward card. I have seen Lawrence look at me that way when I tell him I have my pe ri od. The killer was watch ing me with an ex pres sion, re al ly, of mild an noy ance. This guard died be cause of you, he said. I must have felt things, back in those days, be cause tears were run ning down my face. Youre crazy, I said. The killer shook his head. He made a steeple of his fin gers around the han dle of the ma chete, held it up so that the point aligned with my throat, and eyed me sor row ful ly along the trem bling ax is of the blade. I live here, he said. You were crazy to come. I be gan to cry then, out of fear. An drew was shak ing. Kind ness be gan to pray in her trib al lan guage. Eken em-?i Maria KEke, she said, gra tia ju-?i obi Din weni nonyel-?i, I nwe ngozi kali ik poro nine na ngozi dili nwa afo-?i bu Je su. The killer looked up at Kind ness and he said, You will die next. Kind ness looked back at him. Nso Maria Nne Ciuku, she said, yo nyelanyi bu ndi njo, ki ta, nubosi nke on wu anyi. Amen. The killer nod ded. He breathed. I heard the cold surf in ebb and resur gent. The brown dogs left off the car cass of the killed dog and they came clos er. They stood with their legs trem bling and their hack les up, the blood stiff on their fur. The killer took one step to ward Kind ness but I did not think my mind could sur vive see ing the ma chete cut in to her. I said, No. Pleaseplease, leave her alone. The killer stopped and he turned to me and he said, You again? He was smil ing. An drew said, Sarah, please, I think the best thing we can do here is to To what, An drew? To shut up and hope they wont get round to killing us too? I just think this is not our af fair and so Ah, the killer said. Not your af fair. He turned to the oth er hunters and spread his arms. Not his af fair, him say. Him say, this is black-?man busi ness. Ha ha ha ha! The hunters laughed. They slapped one an oth er on the back and the dogs start ed to cir cle us. When the killer turned back, his face was se ri ous. First time I hear white man say my busi ness not his busi ness. You got our gold. You got our oil. What is wrong with our girls? Noth ing, said poor An drew. I didnt mean that. Are you a racist? Ras sist, was how he pro nounced the word. No, of course not. The killer stared at An drew. Well? he said. You want to save these girls, mis ter? An drew coughed. I watched him. My hus bands hands twitchedhis strong, fine hands I had of ten watched, grip ping cof fees, click ing across keyboards, mak ing dead lines. My hus band, who had filed his Sun day col umn from the de par ture lounge of the air port the pre vi ous day, down to the wire as usual. Id been scan ning it for ty pos when they called our flight. The last para graph went: We are a self-?in ter est ed so ci ety. How will our chil dren learn to put others be fore them selves if we do not? Well? said the killer. You want to save them? An drew looked down at his hands. He stood like that for a long time. Above us, seabirds cir cled and called to one an oth er in that ag onized way they have. I tried to stop my legs from shak ing. Please, I said. KdquIf you will let us take the girls with us, then we will do what ev er you want. Let us all go back to the com pound, please, and we will give you any thing. Mon ey, medicine, any thing. The killer made a high, shrill yelp and a shiv er shook his whole body. He gig gled, and a drib ble of blood es caped through his neat white teeth to splash down on to the dirty green ny lon of his track suit top. You think I care bout that stuff? he said. You dont see this hole in my neck? I am dead in two days. You think I care bout mon ey and medicine? So what do you want? An drew said. The killer moved his ma chete from his right hand to his left. He raised his right hand with the mid dle fin ger ex tend ed. He held it, shak ing, one inch from An draws face and he said, White man been giv ing me this fin ger all my life. To day you can give it me to keep. Now cut off your mid dle fin ger, mis ter, and give it me. An drew flinched and he shook his head and he curled his hands in to balls. He fold ed the thumbs over the fin gers. The killer took his ma chete by the blade and he held the han dle out to my hus band. Do it, he said. Chop chop. Give me your fin ger and I will give you the girls. A long pause. What if I dont? Then you are free to go. But first you will

hear the noises these children make dying. You ever hear a girl dying slow? No. The killer closed his eyes and shook his head, unhurriedly. It is nasty music, he said. You will not forget. Maybe one day you will wake up in Kingston-upon-Thames and you will understand you lost more than your finger. Little Bee was crying now. Kindness held her hand. Do not be afraid, she said. If they kill us today we will eat bread tonight with Jesus. The killer snapped open his eyes and he stared at Andrew and he said, Please, mister. I am not a savage. I do not want to kill these girls. Andrew reached out his hand and he took the killers machete. There was blood on the handle, the guards blood. Andrew looked across at me. I stepped over to him and I put my hand on his chest, gently. I was crying. Oh Andrew. I think you have to do it. I cant. Its just a finger. We didnt do anything wrong. We were just walking down the beach. Just a finger, Andrew, and then well walk back again. Andrew sank to his knees in the sand. He said, I cant believe this is happening. He looked at the machete blade and he scraped it on the sand to clean it. He put his left hand on the sand, palm up, and he folded all the fingers except the middle one. Then he held up the machete in his right hand, but he didnt bring it down. He said, Kees;How do we know he wont kill the girls anyway, Sarah, after Ive done it? Youll know you did what you could. I could get AIDS from this blade. I could die. Ill be with you. Im so proud of you. It was quiet on the beach. Seabirds hung low in the hot blue sky, without flapping their wings, up held on the sea breeze. The rhythm of the surf was unchanged, although the interval between one wave and the next seemed infinite. I watched with the girls and the men and the bloodied dogs to see what my husband would do, and it seemed in that moment that we were all the same, just creatures in nature hanging without any great effort up on the vast warm wind of events that were greater than us. Andrew screamed, then, and he chopped down with the machete. The blade made a whipling sound in the hot air. Then it sliced down in to the sand. It was really quite far from his hand. I wont do it, he said. This is just fuckin bull shit. I dont believe hell let the girls go. Look at him. Hes just going to kill them whatever. Andrew stood, and he left the machete in the sand. I looked at him, and that is when I stopped feeling. I realized I was no longer scared. And I wasnt angry with Andrew. When I looked at him I hardly saw a man anymore. I thought we would all be killed now, and it worried me much less than I would have expected. It troubled me that we had never got around to building the glasshouse at the end of our garden. A sensible thought occurred to me: How lucky I am to have two healthy parents who will take good care of Charlie. The killer sighed and he shrugged and he said, Okay, mister made his choice. Now, mister, run back home to England. You can tell them you came to Africa and you met a real savage. When the killer turned away, I dropped to my knees. I looked straight at Little Bee. She saw what the killer did not see. She saw the white woman put her own left hand down on the hard sand, and she saw her pick up the machete, and she saw her chop off her middle finger with one simple chop, like a girl topping a carrot, neatly, on a quiet Sunday Saturday, between gymkhana and lunch. She saw her drop the machete and rock back on her heels, holding her hand. I suppose the white woman looked just amazed. Oh, I think I said. Oh, oh, oh. The killer spun round and he saw me with the blood welling through my closed fist. On the sand in front of me, there was my finger lying. The finger looked silently and naked. I was embarrassed for it. The killers eyes went wide. Oh fuck, oh fuck, Andrew said. Oh what the fuck have you done, Sarah? What the fuck have you done? He knelt down and he hugged me to him but I pushed him away with my good hand. There was mucus streaming from my mouth and nose. It hurts, Andrew. It hurts, you shit. The killer nodded. He reached down and he picked up my dead finger. He pointed it at Little Bee. You will live, he said. The mistress has paid for your life. Then he pointed my finger at Kindness. But you will die, little one, he said. The mistress would not pay for you. And my boys, you know, they must have their taste of blood. Kindness gripped Little Bees hand. She held her head up. I am not afraid, she said. The Lord is my shepherd. The killer sighed. Then he is a vain and careless shepherd, he said. Then and it was louder than the surf there was the sound of my husband sobbing. Two years later, sitting at my table in Kingston-upon-Thames, I found I could still hear it. I stared down at my damaged hand, spread palm down on the blue table cloth. Little Bee had fallen asleep on the sofa, with her G&T untouched by her side. I realized I couldnt remember the point at which she had stopped telling the story and I had picked up remembering it. I stood up from the kitchen table to fix myself another drink. There were no lemons, so I made do with a little squirt of plastic juice from the Jif lemon in the fridge. When I picked up my glass, the ice cubes rattled uncontrollably. The G&T tasted vile but it gave me courage. I picked up the phone and dialed the number of the man I suppose I must call my lover, although that word rather makes me squirm. I realized it was the second time Id phoned Lawrence that day. Id been trying not to. Id lasted almost a whole week, since Andrew died. It was the longest Id been faithful to my husband in

years. Sarah? Is that you? Lawrence's voice was a whisper. My throat tightened. I found that I couldn't reply straight away. Sarah? I've been thinking about you all day. Was it horrible? You should have let me come to the funeral. I swallowed. It would have been inappropriate. Oh Sarah, who would have known? I would have known, Lawrence. My conscience is about all I've got left. Silence. His slow breath over the phone. It's okay to still love Andrew, you know. It's okay with me, anyway. You think I still love him? I'm suggesting it. In case it helps. I laughed almost inaudible exhalation of air. Everybody's trying to help me today. Even Charlie went to bed without the slightest fuss. It's normal that people want to help. You're suffering. In suffering, is what I am. It amazes me that people like you still care about me. You're being hard on yourself. Am I? I saw my husband's coffin today, being shunted about on rollers. When are you going to take a look at yourself, if not on a day like this? Mmm, said Lawrence. Not many men would cut off a finger, would they Lawrence? What? No. I definitely don't think I would. My throat burned. I expected too much of Andrew, didn't I? Not just on the beach. I expected too much of life. A long silence. What did you expect of me? said Lawrence. The question caught me unprepared and there was anger in his voice. My phone hand trembled. You're using the past tense, I said. I wish you wouldn't. No? No. Please, no. Oh. I thought that's what this call was about. I was thinking, That's why she didn't ask me to the funeral. Because this is the way you'd do, isn't it, if you broke up with me? There'd be a preamble where you reminded me what a difficult person you are, and then you'd prove it. Please, Lawrence. That's horrible. Oh God, I know. I'm sorry. Please don't be angry with me. I'm phoning to ask your advice. A pause. Then a laugh down the phone. Not bitter, but bleak. You don't ask for advice, Sarah. No? No. Not ever. Not about things that matter, anyway. You ask whether your tights look right with your shoes. You ask which bracelet suits your wrist. You're not asking for input. You're asking your admirers to prove they're paying attention. Am I really that bad? Actually you're worse. Because if I do ever tell you gold looks nice with your skin, you make a special point of wearing silver. Do I? I never even noticed. I'm sorry. Don't be. I love that you don't even notice. There are plenty of women who care what one thinks of their jewelry. I swirled my G&T and took a careful sip. You're trying to make me feel better about my self, aren't you? I'm just saying you're not the kind of woman you meet every day. And that's praise, is it? It's relative praise, yes. Now stop fishing. I smiled, for the first time in a week I think. We've never talked like this before, have we? I said. Talked honestly, I mean. You want the honest answer? Apparently not. I have talked honestly and you haven't listened. Around me the house was dark and silent. The only sound was the rattle of the ice cubes in my drink. When I spoke, my voice had a break in it. I'm listening now, Lawrence. God knows I'm listening now. A brief silence. Then another voice carried over the line. It was Lawrence's wife Linda, shouting in the background: Who's on the phone? And Lawrence shouted back: Just someone from work. Oh, Lawrence. As if one would throw in that just, if it really was someone from work. You would simply say, It's work, wouldn't you? I thought about Linda then, and how it must feel to have to share Lawrence with me. Her cold fury not at the necessity of sharing, but at Lawrence's naivete in imagining that Linda didn't absolutely know. I thought about how the deceit must have acquired a certain uneven symmetry in their couple. I imagined the drab and ordinary lover that Linda would have taken in revenge in spite and in haste. Oh, it was too awful. Out of respect for Linda, I hung up. I steadied the hand that gripped my G&T and I looked over at Little Bee, sleeping. The memories from the beach swirled in my mind, inchoate, senseless, awful. I called Lawrence again. Can you come over? I'd love to but I can't tonight. Linda's going out with a friend and I've got the kids. Can you get a babysitter? I realized I sounded plaintive, and I cursed myself for it. Lawrence had picked up my tone too. Darling? he said. You know I'd come if I could, don't you? Sure. Will you cope okay without me? Of course. How? Oh, I dare say I'll cope the way British women always used to cope, before the invention of weakness. Lawrence laughed. Fine. Look, you said you wanted advice. Can we talk about it on the phone? Yes. Of course. I. Look. I need to tell you something. It's all got a little bit complicated. Little Bee turned up here this morning. Who? One of the Nigerian girls. From that day on the beach. Jesus! I thought you said the men killed her. I was sure they had. I saw the men drag her off. Her and the other one. I watched them being dragged kicking and screaming up the beach. I watched them till they were tiny dots and something in me just died. But now, what? She just turned up on your doorstep? This morning. Two hours before the funeral. And you let her in? Wouldn't anyone? No, Sarah. Most people would not. It was as if she'd returned from the dead, Lawrence. I could hardly just slam the door on her. But where was she, then, if she wasn't dead? On a boat, apparently. She got out of the country and came here. Then she was two years in an immigration detention center in Essex. A detention center? Christ, what did she do? Nothing. Asylum

seek ers, ap par ent ly they just lock them up when they ar rive here. For two years? You dont be lieve me? I dont be lieve her. Two years in de ten tion? She must have done some thing. She was African and she didnt have any mon ey. I sup pose they gave her a year for each. Dont be face tious. How did she find you? Ap par ent ly she had An drews driv ing li cense. He dropped his wal let in the sand. Oh my god. And shes still there? Shes asleep on my so fa. You must be com plete ly freaked out. This morn ing I thought I was los ing my mind. It didnt seem re al. Why didnt you call me? I did, re mem ber? Your nan ny was late. You were in a rush. Is she threat en ing you? Tell me youve called the po lice. No, its not like that. She played re al ly nice ly with Char lie, all af ter noon. He was Bat man, she was Robin. They made quite a team. And that doesnt freak you out? If I start freak ing out now, I wont ev er know how to stop. But whats she do ing there? What does she want? I sup pose she wants to stay here for a while. She says she doesnt know any one else. Are you se ri ous? Can she stay? Legal ly, I mean? Im not sure. I havent asked. Shes ex haust ed. I think she walked here all the way from the de ten tion cen ter. Shes in sane. She di K>&ldnt have any mon ey. She could hard ly take a bus. Look, I dont like it. Im wor ried about you be ing all alone with her. So what do you think I should do? I think you should wake her up and ask her to leave. Im se ri ous. Leave for where? What if she re fus es? Then I want you to call the po lice and have her re moved. I said noth ing. Do you hear me, Sarah? I want you to call the po lice. I heard you. I wish you wouldnt say I want. Its you Im think ing about. What if she turns nasty? Lit tle Bee? I dont think shes got a nasty bone in her. How do you know? You know noth ing about the wom an. What if she comes in to your room in the night with a kitchen knife? What if shes crazy? I shook my head. My son would know, Lawrence. His bat sens es would tell him. Fuck, Sarah! This isnt fun ny! Call the po lice. I looked at Lit tle Bee, fast asleep on my so fa with her mouth slight ly open and her knees drawn up to her chest. I fell silent. Sarah? Im not go ing to call the po lice. Im go ing to let her stay. But why? What pos si ble good can come of this? I couldnt help her last time. Maybe now I can. And that would prove what, ex act ly? I sighed. I sup pose it would prove your point, Lawrence, about me not be ing good at tak ing ad vice. You know thats not what I meant. Yes. Which brings us back to my orig inal point. Which was what? That Im dif fi cult some times. Lawrence laughed, but I think he was forc ing him self. I put down the phone and stared for a long time at the long, smooth white planks of the kitchen floor. Then I went up stairs to sleep on the floor of my sons room. I want ed to be there with him. I ad mit ted to my self that Lawrence had a point: I didnt know what Lit tle Bee might do in the night. Sit ting with my back against the cold ra di ator of Char lies bed room, with my knees bunched up un der a du vet, I tried to re mem ber what I saw in Lawrence. I fin ished my G&T and winced at the taste of the er satz lemon. It was a small prob lem to have: a lack of re al lemons. It was al most a com fort. I come from a fam ily whose prob lems were al ways small and sur mount able. We didnt Kh="t have ex tra mar ital af fairs in my fam ily. Mum my and Dad dy loved each oth er very much, or else they had hired failed ac tors to play the role of af fa ble love birds in our fam ily home, for twen ty-?five years, and then kept those ac tors on a re tain er so that they could be sum moned back at the drop of a hat when ev er one of their clients off spring threat ened a week end vis it home from uni ver si ty, or a Sun day-?lunch-?with-?par ents-?and-?boyfriend. In my family we took our hol idays in De von and our part ners for life. I won dered how it was that I had bro ken the mold. I looked over at my son, asleep un der his du vet, mo tion less and pale in his Bat man cos tume. I lis tened to the sound of his breath ing, reg ular and sol id and ut ter ly asleep. I couldnt re mem ber sleep ing like that, not since I mar ried An drew. With in the first month, Id known he wasnt the right man. Af ter that, its the grow ing sense of dis sat is fac tion that keeps one awake at night. The brain re fus ing to let go of those al ter na tive lives that might have been. It isnt the strong sleep ers who sleep around. But I was a hap py child, at least, and my name was Sarah Sum mers. I still use Sum mers as my pro fes sion al name, but per son al ly it is lost. As a girl I liked what all girls like: pink plas tic bracelets and lat er sil ver ones; a few prac tice boyfriends and then, in no par tic ular hur ry, men. Eng land was made of dawn mists that rose to the horses shoul der, of cakes cooled on wire trays for the cut ting, of soft awak en ings. My first re al choice was what to take at uni ver si ty. My teach ers all said I should study law, so nat ural ly I chose jour nal ism. I met An drew ORourke when we were both work ing on a Lon don evening pa per. Ours seemed to per fect ly ex press the spir it of the city. Thir ty-?one pages of celebri ty go ings-?on about town, and one page of news from the world which ex ist ed be yond Lon dons or bi tal mo tor waythe pa per of fered it up as a sort of me men to mori. Lon don was fun. Men blew through like tall ships, some of them al ready wrecked. I liked An drew be cause he wasnt like the rest. Maybe it was his Irish blood, but he wouldnt let him self be car ried along. An drew was the for eign-?news ed itor at the pa per, which was a bit like be ing the wheels on a boat. He was fired for sheer ob sti na cy and I



took him home to meet my par ents. Then I took his name so that no one else could have it. ORourke is a sharp name and I imag ined my hap pi ness would soft en it. But as Sarah ORourke I lost the habit of hap pi ness. In its place came a sense of amazed sep ara tion. The mar riage was all so sud den. I sup pose if Id stopped to think about it, I would have re al ized that An drew was too like methat we were as stub born as each oth er; that our ad mi ra tion would in evitably be come at tri tion. The on ly rea son we were mar ried in such haste was that my mother begged me not to mar ry An drew at all. One of you in a mar riage has to be soft, she said. One of you has to know how to say, Have it your way. Thats not go ing to be you, dear, so it might as well be the man. Tak ing An drew ORourkes name was the sec ond re al de ci sion of my life, and it was wrong. I sup pose Lit tle Bee would un der stand me. As soon as we let go of our re al names, she and I, we were lost. Ask her to leave, Lawrence had said. But no, no, I couldnt. We were joined by what had hap pened on the beach. Get ting rid of her would be like los ing a part of me. It would be like shed ding a fin ger, or a name. I wasnt go ing to let that hap pen again. I sat on the floor and watched my son sleep ing peace ful ly. I did en vy him for b Ken ve ing able to sleep like that. I didnt sleep at all, not for an en tire week, af ter Africa. The killers just walked away down the beach, and An drew and I walked back to the ho tel compound, in si lence, and set about pack ing up our things af ter an ag oniz ing half hour with the com pound doc tor, who packed the stump of my fin ger with gauze and wrapped it up tight ly. I was in a daze. I re mem ber on the flight home to Lon don that it vague ly sur prised me, just as it had at the end of my child hood, that such a big sto ry could sim ply con tin ue with out me. But that is the way it is with killers, I sup pose. What is the end of all in no cence for you is just an oth er Tues day morn ing for them, and they walk off back to their plan et of death giv ing no more thought to the world of the liv ing than we would give to any oth er tourist des ti na tion: a place to be briefly vis it ed and re turned from with sou venirs and a haunt ing sen sa tion that we could have paid less for them. On the plane home I held my in jured hand high, where it throbbed less painful ly. Through the fog of painkillers, its ap proach un seen and un ex pect ed, the thought pre sent ed it self to me that it would be sen si ble not to let An drew touch my in jury, then or ev er again. In my mind I watched the killers tak ing Lit tle Bee and Kind ness along the beach. I watched them dis ap pear. I watched them pass over the hori zon of my world in to that dan ger ous coun try in my mind where I lay awake at night, think ing of the things those men might have done to them. It nev er fad ed. But I went back to the mag azine. Start ing Nix ie had been the third re al de ci sion of my life, and I re fused ev er to re gret it. Nor was I go ing to give up on de ci sion fourChar lie, my best de ci sion of allor de ci sion five, Lawrence, who I had tru ly meant to re nounce un til the hor ror of Nige ria made me re al ize that was un nec es sary. I threw my self in to mak ing my life work, and I forced my self to let the beach seem dis tant and im per son al. There was trouble in Africa, of course there was. But there was no sense get ting hung up about one par tic ular in ci dent and miss ing the big pic ture. Lawrence in sist ed on that, and for once I took his ad vice. I set up di rect deb its from my bank ac count to a cou ple of African char ities. When peo ple asked what had hap pened to my fin ger, I said that An drew and I had hired a scoot er out there and been in volved in a mi nor ac ci dent. My soul en tered a kind of sus pend ed an ima tion. At home I was calm. At work I was the boss. At night I did not sleep, but I thought I could prob ably make the days work in def inite ly. But now I stood up from the floor of Charlies room. I went...

I re al ized, more than any thing, that I need ed to know now. I need ed to know what had hap pened af ter the killers took those girls away down the beach. I need ed to know what had hap pened next. Five I WOKE UP ON Sarahs so fa. At first I did not know where I was. I had to open my eyes and look all around me. There were cush ions on the so fa and they were made of or ange silk. The cush ions had birds and fl Now ers em broi dered on them. The sun was com ing in through the win dows, and these win dows had cur tains that reached all the way down to the floor. They were made of or ange vel vet. There was a cof fee ta ble with a glass top, so thick that it looked green from the side. On the shelf un der neath the table top there were mag azines. One was about fash ion and one was con cerned with how to make the home more beau ti ful. I sat up and put my feet on the floor. The floor was cov ered with wood. If I was telling this sto ry to the girls back home they would be ask ing me, How can a ta ble be made of cof fee and what is this thing called vel vet and how come that wom an you were stay ing with did not keep her wood in a pile at the side of the house like ev ery body else? How come she left it ly ing all over her floor, was she very lazy? And I would have to tell them: a cof fee ta ble is not made out of cof fee, and vel vet is a fab ric as soft as the un der side of in fant clouds, and the wood on Sarahs floor was not fire wood, it was a SWEDISH-?EN GI NEERED FLOOR

WITH THREE-?STRIP AN TIQUE LAC QUER AND MIN IMUM 3MM RE AL WOOD VE NEER CER TI FIED BY THE FOR EST STEW ARD SHIP COUN CIL (FSC) AS BE ING MAN UFACTURED US ING ETH ICAL FORESTRY PRAC TICES, and I know this be cause I saw a floor just like it ad ver tised in the mag azine that was un der neath the cof fee ta ble and which con cerned beau ti ful homes. And the girls from back home, their eyes would go wide and they would say, Weh, be cause now they would un der stand that I had fi nal ly ar rived in a place be yond the end of the worlda place where wood was made by ma chinesand they would be wonder ing what sor cery I sur vived next. Imag ine how tired I would be come, telling my sto ry to the girls from back home. This is the re al rea son why no one tells us Africans any thing. It is not because any one wants to keep my con ti nent in ig no rance. It is be cause no body has the time to sit down and ex plain the first world from first prin ci ples. Or maybe you would like to, but you cant. Your cul ture has be come so phis ti cat ed, like a com put er, or a drug that you take for a headache. You can use it, but you can not ex plain how it works. Cer tain ly not to girls who stack up their fire wood against the side of the house. If I men tion to you, ca su al ly, that Sarahs house was close to a large park full of deer that were very tame, you do not jump up out of your seat and shout, My god! Fetch me my gun and I will go to hunt one of those fool ish an imals! No, in stead you stay seat ed and you rub your chin wise ly and you say to your self, Hmm, I sup pose that must be Rich mond Park, just out side Lon don. This is a sto ry for so phis ti cat ed peo ple, like you. I do not have to de scribe to you the taste of the tea that Sarah made for me when she came down in to the liv ing room of her house that morn ing. We nev er tast ed tea in my vil lage, even though they grow it in the east of my coun try, where the land ris es up in to the clouds and the trees grow long soft beards of moss from the wet air. There in the east, the plan ta tions stretch up the green hill sides and van ish in to the mist. The tea they grow, that van ish es too. I think all of it is ex port ed. My self I nev er tast ed tea un til I was ex port ed with it. The boat I trav eled in to your coun try, it was load ed with tea. It was piled up in the car go hold in thick brown pa per sacks. I dug in to the sacks to hide. Af ter two days I was too weak to hide any more, so I came up out of the hold. The captain of the ship, he locked me in a cab in. He said it would not be safe to put me with t S puhe crew. So for three weeks and five thou sand miles I looked at the ocean through a small round win dow of glass and I read a book that the cap tain gave me. The book was called Great Ex pec ta tions and it was about a boy called Pip but I do not know how it end ed be cause the boat ar rived in the UK and the cap tain hand ed me over to the im mi gra tion au thor ities. Three weeks and five thou sand miles on a tea shipmaybe if you scratched me you would still find that my skin smells of it. When they put me in the immi gra tion de ten tion cen ter, they gave me a brown blan ket and a white plas tic cup of tea. And when I tast ed it, all I want ed to do was to get back in to the boat and go home again, to my coun try. Tea is the taste of my land: it is bit ter and warm, strong, and sharp with mem ory. It tastes of long ing. It tastes of the dis tance be tween where you are and where you come from. Al so it van ish esthe taste of it van ish es from your tongue while your lips are still hot from the cup. It dis ap pears, like plan ta tions stretch ing up in to the mist. I have heard that your coun try drinks more tea than any oth er. How sad that must make youlike chil dren who long for ab sent moth ers. I am sor ry. So, we drank tea in Sarahs kitchen. Char lie was still asleep in his bed room at the top of the stairs. Sarah put her hand on mine. We need to talk about what hap pened, she said. Are you ready to talk about that? About what hap pened af ter the men took you away down the beach? I did not re ply straight away. I sat at the ta ble, with my eyes look ing all around the kitchen, tak ing in all the new and won der ful sights. For ex am ple there was a re frig er ator in Sarahs kitchen, a huge sil ver box with an ice mak er ma chine built in to it. The front of the ice mak er ma chine was clear glass and you could see what it was do ing in side there. It was mak ing a small, bright cube of ice. It was near ly ready. You will laugh at mesil ly vil lage girlfor star ing at an ice cube like this. You will laugh, but this was the first time I had seen wa ter made sol id. It was beau ti fulbe cause if this could be done, then per haps it could be done to ev ery thing else that was al ways es cap ing and run ning away and van ish ing in to sand or mist. Ev ery thing could be made sol id again, yes, even the time when I played with Nkiru ka in the red dust un der the rope swing. In those days I be lieved such things were pos si ble in your coun try. I knew there were large mir acles just wait ing for me to dis cov er them, if on ly I could find the cen ter, the source of all these small won ders. Be hind the cold glass, the ice cube trem bled on its lit tle met al arm. It glis tened, like a hu man soul. Sarah looked at me. Her eyes were shin ing. Bee? she said. I re al ly need to know. Are you ready to talk about it? The ice cube was fin ished. THUNK, it went, down in to the col lect ing tray. Sarah blinked. The ice mak er start ed mak ing a new cube. Sarah, I said, you do not need to know what hap pened. It was not your fault. Sarah held my hands be tween hers. Please, Bee, she said. I need to know. I sighed. I was an gry. I did not want to talk about it, but if

this woman was going to make me do it then I would do it quickly and I would not spare her. Okay Sarah, I said. After you left, the men took us away down to the beach. We walked for a short time, maybe one hour. We came to a boat on the sand. It was upside down. Some of its planks were broken. It looked like it had been broken by a storm and thrown up on to the beach and left there. The underside of the boat was white from the sun. All the paint had cracked and peeled off it. Even the barnacles on the boat were crumbling off it. The hunters pushed me under the boat and they told me to listen. They said they would let me go, once it was over. It was dark under the boat, and there were crabs moving around under there. They raped my sister. They pushed her up against the side of the boat and they raped her. I heard her moaning. I could not hear everything, through the planks of the boat. It was muffled, the sound. I heard my sister choking, like she was being strangled. I heard the sound of her body beating against the planks. It went on for a very long time. It went on in to the hot part of the day, but it was dark and cool under the boat. At first my sister shouted out verses from the scriptures but later her mind began to go, and then she started to shout out the songs we sang when we were children. In the end there were just screams. At first they were screams of pain but finally they changed and they were like the screams of a newborn baby. There was no grief in them. They were automatic. They went on and on. Each scream was exactly the same, like a machine was making them. I looked up and I saw Sarah staring at me. Her face was completely white and her eyes were red and her hands were up to cover her mouth. She was shaking and I was shaking too, because I had never told this to anyone before. I could not see what they did to my sister. It was on the other side of the boat that the planks were broken. That is the side I could see through. The killer, the one with the wound in his neck, I could see him. He was far off from his men. He was walking in the shore break. He was smoking cigarettes from a packet he had taken out of the pocket of the guard he killed. He was looking out over the ocean. It looked as if he was waiting for something to come from there. Sometimes he put his hand up to touch the wound in his neck. His shoulders were down. It was as if he was carrying a weight. Sarah's whole body was shaking, so hard that the kitchen table was trembling. She was crying. Your sister, she was saying. Your beautiful sister, oh my god, oh Jesus, I I did not want to hurt Sarah any more. I did not want to tell her what happened, but I had to now. I could not stop talking because now I had started my story, it wanted to be finished. We can not choose where to start and stop. Our stories are the tellers of us. Near the end I heard Nkiruka begging to die. I heard the hunters laughing. Then I listened to my sister's bones being broken one by one. That is how my sister died. Yes she was a beautiful girl, you are right. In my village they said she was the kind of girl that could make a man forget his troubles. But sometimes it does not work out like people say. When the men and the dogs were finished with my sister, the only parts of her that they threw in to the sea were the parts that could not be eaten. Sarah stopped crying and shaking then. She was very still. She was holding on to her tea, like she would be blown away if she did not grip on to it. And you, she whispered. What happened to you? I nodded. In the afternoon it got very hot, even under the boat. A breeze started blowing from the sea. It blew sand up against the side of the boat. The sand hissed against the planks. I looked out through the gaps to see what was happening. Out past the surf there were seagulls gliding on the wind. They were very calm. Sometimes they dropped in to the sea and swam back up with silver fish in their beaks. I looked at them very hard, because I thought that what had happened to my sister was going to happen to me now, and I wanted to fix my thoughts on something beautiful. But the men did not come for me. After they finished with my sister, the hunters and the dogs went up in to the jungle to sleep. But the leader, he did not return to his men. He stood in the surf. The waves were breaking around his knees. He was leaning in to the wind. Later it got so hot that the seagulls stopped their fishing. They were just floating on the waves with their heads tucked in to their breasts, like this. Then the leader, he stepped forward in to the waves. When the water came up to his chest he began to swim. He went straight out in to the sea. The seagulls flew up out of his way and then they flapped back down. They only wanted to sleep. The man, he swam out, straight out, and soon I could not see him any more. He disappeared and all I could see was this line, the line between the sea and the sky, and then it got so hot that even the line disappeared. That is when I came out from under the boat, because I knew the men would be sleeping. I looked all around. There was no body on the beach and there was no shade. It was so hot I thought I might die just from the heat. I went down in to the shore break and I made my clothes wet and I ran toward the hotel compound. I ran through the shallow water so that I would not leave marks on the sand for the men to follow. I came to the place where they murdered the guard. There were more seagulls there. They were fighting over the guard's body. They flew up when I walked up the beach. I could not look at the guard's face. There were these little crabs crawling in and

out of his trousers leg. There was a wallet on the ground and I picked it up. It was Andrews wallet, Sarah. I am sorry. I looked inside. There were many plastic cards inside it. There was one that said DRIVING LICENSE and it had a photo of your husband. That is the one that had your address on it. That is the one that I took. There was another card too, his business card, the one with the telephone number, and I took that too. It blew out of my hand into the waves, but I got it back. Then I went to hide in the jungle, but I stayed where I could still see the beach. Then it began to get cooler and a truck drove up from the direction of the hotel compound. It was a canvas-top truck, a military one. Six soldiers jumped down from the back and they stood looking at the guard. They were poking at his body with the toes of their boots. There was a radio in the cab of the truck and it was playing One by U2. I knew this song. It was always playing in our home. This is because the men came from the city one day and they gave us clockwork radios, one to each family in the village. We were supposed to wind them up and listen to the World Service from the BBC, but my sister Nkiruka tuned ours in to the Port Harcourt music station instead. We used to fight over the little windup box because I liked to listen to the news and the current affairs. But now that I was hiding in the jungle behind the beach I wished I had never fought with my sister. Nkiruka loved music and now I saw that she was right because life is extremely short and you can not dance to current affairs. That is when I started to cry. I did not cry when they killed my sister but I did cry when I heard the music coming out of the soldiers truck because I was thinking, That is my sisters favorite song and she will never hear it again. Do you think I am crazy, Sarah? Saisirah shook her head. She was biting her nails. Every one in my village liked U2, I said. Every one in my country, maybe. Wouldn't that be funny, if the oil rebels were playing U2 in their jungle camps, and the government soldiers were playing U2 in their trucks. I think every one was killing every one else and listening to the same music. Do you know what? The first week I was in the detention center, U2 were number one here too. That is a good trick about this world, Sarah. No one likes each other, but every one likes U2. Sarah twisted her hands together on the table. She looked at me. Are you all right to go on? she said. Can you tell me how you got away? I sighed. Okay, I said. The guards were tapping their boots to the music. They rolled the body on to a sheet. They picked up the sheet by the corners and they lifted it into the truck. I thought I should run out to them and ask them to help me. But I was scared, so I stayed where I was. The soldiers drove back down the beach, and then it was very quiet again. When it was sunset I decided I did not want to go to the hotel compound. I was too scared of the soldiers, so I walked the other way. There were fruit bats flying all around. I waited till it was dark before I went past the place where they killed my sister. There was no moon light, there was only a blue glow from the small creatures in the sea. Sometimes there was a fresh water stream that ran down the beach where I could drink. I walked all night and when it got light I went back into the jungle. I found a red fruit to eat. I did not know its name but I was hungry. It was bitter and I was very sick. I was very scared the men would come and find me again. When I had to go to the toilet I buried my excrement so that I would not leave any traces. Every noise I heard, I thought it was the men coming back. I said to myself, Little Bee, the men are coming to tear your wings off. It was like this for two more nights and on the last night I came to a port. There were red and green lights flashing out in the sea, and there was a long concrete sea wall. I walked all along the top of the wall. There were waves crashing all over me, but there were no guards. Near the end of the sea wall, on the land side, there were two ships tied up next to each other. The near one had an Italian flag. The other one was British, so I climbed over the Italian ship to get to it. I went down into the cargo hold. It was easy to find it because there were signs written in English. And English, you know, it is the official language of my country. I stopped talking then, and I looked down at the table cloth. Sarah came around to my side of the table and she sat on the chair beside me and she hugged me for a long time. Then we sat there holding our cold cups of tea. I rested my head on Sarahs shoulder. Outside, the day grew a little brighter. We did not say anything. After a short time I heard footsteps on the stairs, and then Charlie came in to the kitchen. Sarah wiped her eyes and took a deep breath and quickly sat up straight. Charlie was wearing his Batman costume, but without the mask and without the belt that he kept his Batman tools in. It did not look as if he was expecting trouble, that morning. When he saw me he blinked. He was surprised that I was still there, I think. He rubbed his eyes sleepily and pressed the top of his head against his mothers side. Itch till sleep eat Im, he said. Excuse me Batman? said Sarah. I said, its still sleepy time. Why is you awake? Sht= Well, Mummy and Little Bee woke up early this morning. Mmm? We had a lot to catch up on. Mmm? Oh god, Batman, is it that you dont understand, or you dont agree? Mmm? Oh, I see, darling, you are like a little bat with its sonar. Youll keep sending out those Mmms until one of them bounces off something solid, wont you? Mmm? Charlie stared at his moth-

er. She looked back at him for a while, and then she turned and smiled at me. Her tears were start ing to flow again. Char lie has ex traor di nary eyes, doesnt he? Theyre like ecosys tems in as pic. No they isnt, said Char lie. Sarah laughed. Well dar ling, what I mean is, any one can see theres a lot go ing on in there. She tapped the side of Char lies head. Hmm, said Char lie. Why is you cry ing, Mum my? Sarah gave one big sob and then waved it away. Its why are you, Char lie, not why is you, she said. Why are you cry ing, Mum my? Sarah col lapsed. It was as if all the strength went out of her bones. She sank down so that her head rest ed on her arms on the table top and she wept. Oh, Char lie, she said. Mum my is cry ing be cause Mum my drank four G and Ts last night. Mum my is cry ing be cause of some thing Mum my has been try ing not to think about. Im so sor ry, Char lie. Mum my is too grown up to feel very much any more, and so when she does, it catch es her by sur prise. Mmm? said Char lie. Oh Char lie! said Sarah. She opened her arms and Char lie climbed up on to her lap and they hugged. It was not right for me to be there with them, so I went out in to the gar den and I sat down be side the fish pond. I thought about my sis ter for a long time. Lat er, when the sun was high er in the sky and the noise of the traf fic on the roads had grown in to a con stant rum ble, Sarah came out in to the gar den to find me. Sor ry, she said. I had to take Char lie to nurs ery. Its okay. She sat down next to me and she put her hand on my shoul der. How are you feel ing? I shrugged. Okay, I said. Sarah smiled, but it was a sad smile. I dont know what to say, she said. I do not know ei ther. We sat there and we watched a cat rolling on the g Slli rass on the oth er side of the gar den, in a bright patch of sun shine. That cat looks hap py, I said. Mmm, said Sarah. Its the neigh bors. I nod ded. Sarah took a deep breath. Look, do you want to stay here for a while? she said. Here? With you? Yes. With me and Char lie. I rubbed my eyes. I do not know. I am il le gal, Sarah. The men can come any minute to send me back to my coun try. Why did they let you out of the de ten tion cen ter, if youre not al lowed to stay? They made a mis take. If you look good or you talk good, some times they make mis takes for you. But youre free now. They couldnt just come for you, Bee. This isnt Nazi Ger many. There must be some pro ce dure we can go through. Some ap peal. I can tell them what hap pened to you over there. What will hap pen to you if you go back. I shook my head. They will tell you Nige ria is a safe coun try, Sarah. Peo ple like me, they can just come and drive us straight to the air port. Im sure we can work some thing out, Bee. I ed it a mag azine. I know peo ple. We could kick up a stink. I looked at the ground. Sarah smiled. She put her hand on my hand. Youre young, Bee. You dont know how the world works yet. All youve seen is trou ble, so you think trou ble is all youre go ing to get. You have seen trou ble too, Sarah. You are mak ing a mis take if you think it is un usu al. I am telling you, trou ble is like the ocean. It cov ers two thirds of the world. Sarah flinched, as if some thing had struck her face. What is it? I said. She held her head in her hands. Its noth ing, she said. Its sil ly. I could not think of any thing to say. I looked all around her gar den for some thing to kill my self with, in case the men sud den ly came. There was a shed at the far end of the gar den, with a large gar den fork lean ing against it. That is a fine im ple ment, I thought. If the men sud den ly come, I will run with that fork and I will throw my self on to those sharp shin ing points. I dug my nails in to the soil of the flow er bed be side us, and I squeezed the sticky soil be tween my fin gers. What are you think ing, Bee? Mmm? What are you think ing about? Oh. Cas sa va. Why cas sa va? In my vil lage we grew cas sa va. We plant ed it and wa tered it and when it was highlike this Sike;we plucked its leaves so that the grow ing would go in to the root, and when it was ready we dug it up and peeled it and grat ed it and pressed it and fer ment ed it and fried it and mixed it with wa ter and made paste out of it and ate it and ate it and ate it. When I slept at night I dreamed of it. What else did you do? Some times we played on a rope swing. Sarah smiled. She looked away in to the gar den. There isnt much cas sa va round here, she said. Tons of clema tis. Plen ty of camel lias. I nod ded. Cas sa va would not grow in this soil. Sarah smiled, but she was cry ing at the same time. I held her hand. There were tears run ning down her face. Oh Bee, she said. I feel so bloody guilty. This is not your fault, Sarah. I lost my par ents and my sis ter. You have lost your hus band. Both of us have lost. I didnt lose An drew, Bee. I de stroyed him. I cheat ed on him with an oth er man. Thats the on ly rea son we were in bloody Nige ria in the first place. We thought we need ed a hol iday. To patch things up. You see? I just shrugged my shoul ders. Sarah sighed. I sup pose youre go ing to tell me youve nev er tak en a hol iday. I looked down at my hands. Ac tu al ly, I have nev er tak en a man. Sarah blinked. Yes. Of course. I for get youre so young, some times. We sat still for a minute. Sarahs mo bile tele phone rang. She talked. When the call was fin ished she looked very tired. That was the nurs ery. They want me to go and pick up Char lie. Hes been fight ing with the oth er chil dren. They say hes out of con trol. She bit her lip. Hes nev er done that be fore. She picked up her tele phone again and pressed some but tons. She held the tele phone up to her ear while she looked over my shoul der, over the gar den. She was still chew ing her lip. Af ter a few sec

onds, there was the sound of an oth er tele phone ring ing. It was a small, dis tant sound, from in side the house. Sarahs face went still. Then, slow ly, she took the tele phone down from her ear and pressed one of its but tons. From the house, the sound of the oth er telephone stopped. Oh Je sus, said Sarah. Oh no. What? What is it? Sarah took a deep breath. Her whole body shud dered. I called An drew. I dont know why. It was com plete ly au to mat ic, I didnt even think. You knowif theres a prob lem with Char lie, I al ways call Andrew. I just for got he wasyou know. Oh god. Im re al ly los ing it. I thought I was ready, you know, to hear what hap pened to youand your sis ter. But I wasnt. I wasnt ready for it. Oh god. We sat there and I held her hand while she cried. Af ter ward, she passed her tele phone to me. She point ed at the screen. Hes still in my ad dress book. Do you see? The screen of her tele phone said AN DREW, and then a num ber. Just AN DREWthere was no sur name. Will you delete him for me, Bee? I cant do it. I held her tele phone in my hands. I had seen peo ple speak ing on mo bile phones, but I al ways thought they would be very com pli cat ed. You will laugh at methere she goes again, that sil ly lit tle girl with the smell of tea in her skin and the stains of cas sa va tops still on her fin gersbut I al ways thought there would be a fre quen cy to find. I thought you would have to turn some di al un til you found the sig nal of your friend, very small and faint, like tun ing in to the BBC World Ser vice on a windup ra dio. I sup posed that mo bile tele phones were dif fi cult like this. You would turn the di al through all the hiss ing and the squeak ing sounds, and first you would hear your friends voice very strange and thin and near ly drowned out by howl inglike your friend had been squashed as flat as a bis cuit and dropped in to a met al box full of mon keysbut then you would turn the di al just one tiny frac tion more and sud den ly your friend would say some thing like, God save the Queen!, and tell you all about the weath er in the ship ping ar eas around the off shore wa ters of the Unit ed Kingdom of Great Britain and North ern Ire land. Af ter that, you could talk. But ac tu al ly I dis cov ered that it was much eas ier than this to use a mo bile tele phone. Ev ery thing is so easy in your coun try. Next to the name, AN DREW, there was a thing that said OP TIONS, and I pressed it. Op tion three was DELETE, so I pressed that, and An drew ORourke was gone. Thank you, said Sarah. I just couldnt do it my self. She looked down at her phone for a long time. I feel so bloody fright ened, Bee. Theres no one to call. An drew was ab so lute ly un bear able some times but he was al ways so sen si ble. I sup pose it was crazy of me, to send Char lie straight back to the nurs ery, af ter yes ter day. But I thought it would be good for him, to get back in to the rou tine. Theres no one to ask any more, Bee. Do you un der stand? I dont know if I can do this on my own. Make all the right de ci sions for Char lie on my own. Years of it, do you see? The right be hav ior, the right schools, the right friends, the right uni ver si ty, the right wife. Oh god, poor old Char lie. I put my hand on her hand. If you want, I can come to the nurs ery with you, I said. Sarah tilt ed her head and looked at me for a long time. Then she smiled. Not dressed like that, she said. Ten min utes lat er I left the house with Sarah. I was wear ing a pink sum mer dress she lent me. It was the pret ti est thing I had ev er worn. Around the neck it had fine white flow ers stitched in, very del icate and fan cy. I felt like the Queen of Eng land. It was a sun ny morn ing and there was a cool breeze and I skipped along the pave ment be hind Sarah and ev ery time we passed a cat or a post man or a wom an push ing a pram I smiled and I said, How do you do? All of them looked at m Sem e like I was a crazy girl, I do not know why. I was think ing, That is no way to greet your monarch. I did not like the nurs ery. It was in a big house with tall win dows, but the win dows were not open even though it was a fine day. In side, the air was stuffy. It smelled of toi lets and poster paint, and this was ex act ly the smell of the ther apy room in the im mi gra tion de ten tion cen ter, so I was feel ing sad from the mem ory. In the de ten tion cen ter they did not open the win dows be cause the win dows did not open. In the ther apy room they gave us poster paints and brush es and they told us we must ex press our selves. I used a lot of red paint. When the ther apeu tic as sis tant looked at what I paint ed, she said it would be good for me to try to move on. I said, yes madam, it will be my plea sure. If you will just open a lit tle win dow for me, or even bet ter a door, I will be hap py to move on right away. I smiled, but the ther apeu tic as sis tant did not think it was a good joke. In Char lies nurs ery, the play lead er did not think I was a good joke ei ther. I knew she was the play lead er be cause she had a badge on her green apron that said PLAY LEAD ER. She stared at me but she did not speak to me, she spoke to Sarah. She said, Im sor ry, we cant have vis itors, its pol icy. Is this the childs car er? Sarah looked at me and then she turned back to the play lead er. She said, Look, its com pli cat ed, okay? The play lead er frowned. Fi nal ly she let me stand by the door while Sarah went in to the room and tried to calm Char lie. Poor Char lie. They had made him take off his Bat man cos tumethat was what had start ed it. They had made him take it off be cause he had uri nat ed in it. They want ed him to be clean, but Char lie did not want to be clean. He pre ferred to be stink ing in his black mask and cape than to smell fresh in the white cot ton over

all they had put him in. His face was red and dirty with poster paint and tears. He was howl ing with rage. When any one came near him he hit at them, with his small fists bang ing in to their knees. He bit and he scratched and he screamed. He stood with his back pressed in to the cor ner. He faced out into the room and he screamed, NO NO NO NO NO! Sarah went up to him. She knelt down so her face was close to his. She said, Oh dar ling. Char lie stopped shout ing. He looked at Sarah. His bot tom lip trem bled. Then his jaw be came firm again. He leaned to ward his moth er, and he spat. He said, GO AWAY I WANT MY DAD DY! They were mak ing the oth er chil dren sit cross-?legged on the floor, in the far cor ner of the room. They were hav ing sto ry time. The oth er chil dren were fac ing away from Char lies cor ner, but they kept wrig gling around to look over their shoul ders with pale, scared faces. A wom an was read ing them the sto ry. She wore blue jeans and white train ers and a turquoise sweat shirt. She was say ing, and Max tamed them by the trick of TURN AROUND AND FACE FRONT, CAITLIN by the trick of star ing straight in to their eyes and say ing EM MA, PLEASE CON CEN TRATE, JAMES, STOP WHIS PER ING of staring straight in to their eyes and say ing WILL YOU FACE FRONT, OL LIE, THERES NOTH ING GO ING ON BE HIND YOU. Sarah knelt on the floor and she wiped Char lies spit off her cheek. She was cry ing. She was hold ing her arms out to Char lie. Char lie turned around and hid his face in the cor ner. The wom an read ing the sto ry was say ing, be still. I went to ward Sarah. The play lead er gave me a look which meant, I told you to stay by the door. I gave her a look back which meant, How dare you? It was a very good look. I learned it from Queen Eliz abeth the Sec ond, on the back of the British five-?pound note. The play lead er took one step back and I went up to Sarah. I touched her on the shoul der. Sarah looked up at me. Oh god, she said. Poor Char lie, I dont know what to do. What do you nor mal ly do when he is like this? I cope. I al ways cope. Oh god, Bee, I dont know whats hap pen ing to me. Ive for got ten how to cope. Sarah cov ered her face with her hands. The play lead er took her away and sat her down. I went in to the cor ner with Char lie. I stood next to him and I turned my face in to the cor ner too. I did not look at him, I looked at the bricks and I did not say any thing. I am good at look ing at bricks and not say ing any thing. In the im mi gra tion de ten tion cen ter I did it for two years, and that is my record. I was think ing what I would do in that nurs ery room, if the men came sud den ly. It was not an easy room, I am telling you. For ex am ple, there was noth ing to cut your self with. All the scis sors were made of plas tic and their ends were round and soft. If I sud den ly need ed to kill my self in that room, I did not know how I was go ing to do it. Af ter a long time Char lie looked up at me. What is you do ing? he said. I shrugged my shoul ders. I am think ing how to es cape from this place. Si lence. Char lie sighed. They tooked mine Bat man cos tume. Why did they do that? Be cause of why I done a wee in my Bat man cos tume. I knelt down and looked in to Char lies eyes. We are the same, you and me. I spent two years in a place like this. They make us do the things we do not want. Does it make you cross? Char lie nod ded. I said, It makes me cross too. From be hind us I could hear that the rest of the nurs ery was go ing back to its own busi ness. Chil dren were talk ing and shout ing again, and the wom en were help ing and laugh ing and scold ing. In our cor ner, Char lie looked at the ground. I want mine dad dy, he said. Your dad dy is dead, Char lie. Do you know what this means? Yes. In heav en. Yes. Wheres heav en? It is a place like this. Like a nurs ery, or a de ten tion cen ter, or a strange coun try far away. He wants to come home to you, but he cant. Your dad dy is like my dad dy. Oh. Is yours dad dy dead too? Yes Char lie. My dad dy is dead and my mum my is dead and my sis ter is dead too. All of them are dead. Why? I shrugged my shoul ders. The bad dies got them, Char lie. Char lie twist ed his hands to geth er and bent down to pick up a small scrap of red pa per from the floor. He tore at it, and he put it on his tongue to see how it tast ed, and then it got stuck on his fin gers be cause of the damp ness. He held his tongue be tween his teeth so he could con cen trate on peel ing the pa per off his fin gers. Then he looked up. Is you sad like me? I made my face go in to a smile. Do I look sad, Char lie? Char lie looked at me. I tick led him un der his arms and he start ed to laugh. Do we look sad, Char lie? Hey? You and me? Are we sad now? Char lie was laugh ing and wrig gling fi nal ly, so I pulled him close to me and I looked in his eyes. We are not go ing to be sad, Char lie. Not you and me. Es pe cial ly not you, Char lie, be cause you are the luck iest boy in the world. You know why this is? Why? Be cause you have a ma ma, Char lie, and she loves you, and that is some thing, no? I gave Char lie a lit tle push to ward his moth er and he ran to her. He buried his face against her dress and they hugged each oth er. Sarah was cry ing and smil ing at the same time. She was speak ing in to Char lies ear, say ing Char lie, Char lie, Char lie. Then Char lies voice came, and it was muf fled against his moth ers dress. He said, Im NOT Char lie, Mum my, Im Bat man. Sarah looked at me over Char lies shoul der and she just said, Thank you, not mak ing any sound but just mov ing her lips. We walked home from the nurs ery with Char lie swing ing be tween us. The day was beau ti ful. The sun was hot

and the air was buzzing with bees and the scent of flow ers was ev ery where. Be side the pave ment there were the front gar dens of the hous es, full of soft col ors. It was hard not to be full of hope. I think I shall teach you the names of all of the En glish flow ers, said Sarah. This is fuch sia, and this is a rose, and this is hon ey suck le. What? What are you smil ing about? There are no goats. That is why you have all these beau ti ful flow ers. There were goats, in your vil lage? Yes, and they ate all the flow ers. Im sor ry. Do not be sor ry. We ate all the goats. Sarah frowned. Still, she said. I think Id rather have hon ey suck le. One day I will take you where I come from and you will eat on ly cas sa va for a week and then you will tell me if you would rather have hon ey suck le or goat. Sarah smiled and leaned over to smell the hon ey suck le blos som. Now I saw that she was cry ing again. Oh, Im sor ry, said Sarah. I cant seem to stop. Oh look at me, Im all over the place. Char lie looked up at his moth er and I rubbed the top of his head to show him ev ery thing was okay. We start ed to walk again. Sarah blew her nose on a tis sue. She said, How long am I go ing to be like this, do you sup pose? It was one year for me, af ter they killed my sis ter. Be fore you could think straight again? Be fore I could think at all. At first I was just run ning, run ning, run ningget ting away from where it hap pened, you know? Then there was the de ten tion cen ter. It was very bad. It is not pos si ble to think clear ly in there. You have not com mit ted a crime, so all you can think of is, When will I be let out? But they tell you noth ing. Af ter a month, six months, you start to think, Maybe I will grow old in here. Maybe I will die here. Maybe I am al ready dead. For the first year all I could think about was killing my self. When ev ery one else is dead, some times you think it would be eas ier to join them, you know? But you have to move on. Move on, move on, they tell you. As if you are stub born. As if you are chew ing on their flow ers like a goat. Move on, move on. At five P. M. They tell you to move on and at six P. M. They lock you back in your cell. Didnt they give you any help at all in that place? I sighed. They tried to help us, you know? There were some good peo ple. Psy chi atrists, vol un teers. But there was on ly so much they could do for us in there. One of the psy chi atrists, she said to me, Psy chi atry in this place is like serv ing an in-?flight meal in the mid dle of a plane crash. If I want ed to make you well, as a doc tor, I should be giv ing you a parachute, not a cheese-?and-?pick le sand wich. To be well in your mind you have first to be free, you see? Sarah pressed the tis sue in to the cor ners of her eyes. Im not sure its eas ier out here, Bee. But I will help you. Sarah smiled. Youre six teen years old, Bee. Youre a refugee. Youre an or phan, for gods sake. Im the one who ought to be help ing you. I pulled on Sarahs shoul der to stop her. I took her left hand and I held it up to her. Char lie stood and looked up at us with big eyes. Look, Sarah. You have helped me enough al ready. You cut off your own fin ger for me. You saved my life. I should have done more. I should have saved your sis ter too. How? I should have thought of some thing. I shook my head. You did ev ery thing you could, Sarah. But we should nev er have been in that sit ua tion, Bee. Dont you see? We went on hol iday to a place we had no right to be. And what if you had not been there, Sarah? If you and An drew had not been there, then Nkiru ka and me, we would both be dead. I turned to Char lie. Your mum my saved my life, did you know that? She saved me from the bad dies. Char lie looked up at his moth er. Like Bat man? he said. Sarah smiled, the way I was used to now, with the tears start ing to come to her eyes again. Like Bat mum. Is that why you isnt got your one fin ger? Why I havent got one fin ger. Yes, dar ling. Did the bad dies take it? The Pen guin? No, dar ling. Was it the Puf fin? Sarah laughed. Yes dar ling, it was that aw ful Puf fin. Char lie grinned. Naughty naughty Puf fin, he said, and he ran ahead of us down the pave ment, shoot ing bad dies with a gun that was not vis ible to my eyes. Sarah turned to me. Bless you, she said. I held tight to her arm and I placed the palm of her left hand on the back of my left hand. I ar ranged my fin gers un der neath hers so that the on ly one of my fin gers you could see was the one that was miss ing from Sarahs hand. I saw how it could be. I saw how we could make a life again. I know it was crazy to think it but my heart was pound ing, pound ing, pound ing. I will help you, I said. If you want me to stay then this is how it will be be tween us. Maybe I will on ly be able to stay for one month, maybe on ly one week. Some day, the men will come. But while I am here I will be like your daugh ter. I will love you as if you were my moth er and I will love Char lie as if he was my broth er. Sarah stared at me. Good ness, she said. What is it? Well, its just that on the way home from the nurs ery, with the oth er moth ers, we usu al ly talk about pot ty train ing and cakes. I dropped Sarahs hand and I looked down at the ground. Oh Bee, Im sor ry, she said. This is all just a lit tle bit sud den and a lit tle bit se ri ous, thats all. Im so con fused. I need a bit more time to think. I looked up at Sarah again. In her eyes I saw that it was new for her, this feel ing of not know ing straight away what to do. Her eyes were the eyes of a crea ture who has on ly just been born. Be fore it is fa mil iar with its world, there is on ly ter ror. I knew this ex pres sion very well. Once you have seen as many peo ple as I have be ing pushed in through the doors of the im mi gra tion de ten tion cen ter, it is easy to



recognize this look. It made me want to remove that pain from Sarah's life as quickly as I could. I am sorry, Sarah. Please forget about it. I will leave. You see? The psychiatrist at the detention center was right, she could not do anything for me. I am still crazy. Sarah did not say anything. She just held on to my arm and we followed Charlie down the street. Charlie was racing along and knocking the heads off the roses in the front gardens. He knocked them off with karate chops. They fell, each one with a sudden fall and a silent explosion of petals. Like my story with Nkiru Soroka, like my story with Yvette. My feet crushed the petals as we passed over them, and I realized that my story was only made of endings. Back at the house, we sat in Sarah's kitchen. We drank tea...

When I opened my eyes again, Sarah was watching me. You know, Bee, I was thinking about what you said, about you staying. About us helping each other. I think you're right. Maybe it is time to be serious. Maybe these are serious times. **SIX SERIOUS TIMES BEGAN ON** a gray, ominous day in London. I wasn't looking for serious. If I'm honest, I suppose I was looking for a bit of the other. Charlie was nearly two years old and I was emerging from the introverted, chrysalid stage of early motherhood. I fitted back in to my favorite skirts. I felt like showing off my wings. I decided to spend a day in the field. The idea was to remind my editorial girls that it was possible to write a feature article all on one's own. I hoped that by inspiring the staff to indulge in a little reportage, my commissioning budget would be spared. It was simply a question, I had told the office airily, of applying one's pithy remarks sequentially to paper rather than scrawling them invidiously on sample boxes. Really I just wanted my staff to be happy. At their age I'd been fresh out of my journalism degree and intoxicated with the job. Exposing corruption, branding truth. How well it had suited me, that absolute license to march up to evil doers and demand who, what, where, when, and why? But now, standing in the lobby of the Home Office building in Marsham Street, waiting for a ten o'clock interview, I realized I wasn't looking forward to it. Perhaps at twenty, one is naturally curious about life, but at thirty, simply suspicious of any one who still has one. I clutched my brand-new notepad and Dictaphone in the hope that some of their youthful predilection would rub off on me. I was angry with Andrew. I couldn't focus. I didn't even look the part of a reporter; my spiral notepad was virginal white. While I waited, I besmirched it with notes from a fictitious interview. Through the lobby of the Home Office building, the public sector shuffled past in its scuffed shoes, balancing its morning coffee on cardboard carry trays. The women bulged out of M&S trouser suits, waltzes wobbling and banjos clacking. The men seemed limp and hypochondriacally garroted by their ties. Every one stooped, or scuttled, or nervously ticked. They carried themselves like weather presenters preparing to lower expectations for the bank-holiday weekend. I tried to concentrate on the article I wanted to write. An optimistic piece was what I needed; something bright and positive. Something absolutely unlike anything Andrew would write in his Times column, in other words. Andrew and I had been arguing. His copy was getting gloomier and gloomier. I think he had truly started to believe that Britain was sinking in to the sea. Crime was spreading, schools were failing, immigration was creeping, and public morals were slipping. It seemed as if everything was seeping and sprawling and oozing, and I hated it. Now that Charlie was almost two I suppose I was looking in to the future my child would have to inhabit, and realizing that bitching about it might possibly not be the most constructive strategy. Why do you always have to be so bloody negative? I asked Andrew. If the country really is on the slide, then why not write about the people who are doing something about it? Oh yeah? Like whom? Well, like the Home Office, for example. They're the ones on the front line, after all. Oh that's genius Sarah, that really is. Because people really trust the Home Office, don't they? And what will you call your fine uplifting piece? You mean what's my title? Well how about *The Battle for Britain*? I know, I know. Andrew exploded with laughter. We had a blazing row. I told him I was finally doing something constructive with my magazine. He told me I was finally growing out of my magazine's demographic. Not only was I getting old, in other words, but everything I had worked on for the last decade was puerile. How almost surgically hurtful. I was still furious when I arrived at the Home Office building. Always the Surrey girl, aren't you? That had been Andrew's parting shot. What exactly do you require the Home Office to do about this bloody country, Sarah? Strafe the lowlifes with Spitfires? Andrew had a gift for deepening the incisions he began. It wasn't our first row since Charlie was born, and he always did this at the end brought the argument back to my upbringing, which infuriated me as it was the one thing I couldn't help. I stood in the lobby as the dowdy clerks flowed all around me. I blinked, looked down at my shoes, and had my first sensible thought for days. I realized I

hadnt come out in to the world to day to make a point to my ed ito ri al staff. Se nior ed itors didnt re al ly go back to re port ing to shave a few pounds from their com mis sion ing bud gets. I was there, I re al ized, en tire ly to make a point to An drew. And when Lawrence Os born came down and in tro duced him self on the dot of ten oclocktall, grin ning, not con spic uous ly hand someI un der stood that the point I was mak ing to An drew was not nec es sar ily go ing to be an ed ito ri al one. Lawrence looked down at his clip board. Thats odd, he said. Theyve marked down this in ter view as non hos tile. I re al ized I was look ing at him fierce ly. I blushed. Oh god, Im sor ry. Bad morn ing. Dont men tion it. Just tell me youll try to be nice to me. All you jour nal ists seem to have it in for us these days. I smiled. I am go ing to be nice to you. I think you peo ple do a ter rif ic job. Ah, thats be cause you havent seen the statis tics weve seen. I laughed, and Lawrence raised his eye brows. &ldquo [dtho;You think Im jok ing, he said. His voice was flat and un re mark able. He didnt sound pub lic school. There was a touch of rough ness in his vow els, or a sense of some wild ness reined in, as if he was mak ing an ef fort. It was hard to place his voice. He took me on a tour of the build ing. We looked in on the As sets Re cov ery Agen cy and the Crim inal Records Bu reau. The mood was busi nesslike, but re lax ed. Dis cour age a lit tle crime, drink a lit tle cof feethat seemed to be the tone. We walked along un nat ural gal leries floored with nat ural ma te ri als and bathed in nat ural light. So Lawrence, I said, what do you think is go ing wrong with Britain? Lawrence stopped and turned. His face glowed in a soft yel low ray, fil tered through col ored glass. Youre ask ing the wrong man, he said. If I knew the an swer to that, Id fix it. Isnt that what youre sup posed to do at the Home Of fice? Fix it? I dont ac tu al ly work in any of the de part ments. They tried me out here and there for a while, but I dont think my heart was in it. So here I am in the press of fice. But sure ly you must have an opin ion? Lawrence sighed. Ev ery one has an opin ion, dont they? Maybe thats whats wrong with this coun try. What? Why are you smil ing? I wish youd tell that to my hus band. Ah. He has opin ions, does he? On a va ri ety of sub jects. Well, maybe he should work here. They love a pol icy de bate around these parts, they re al ly do. Your first in ter view, for ex am ple Lawrence looked at his clip board, search ing for a name. Im sor ry? I said. I thought you were my in ter view. Lawrence looked up. Ah, he said. No, Im just the warm-up guy. Im sor ry, I should have ex plained. Oh. Well dont look so dis ap point ed. Ive fixed up a good day for you, I re al ly have. Youve got three heads of de part ment lined up, and a re al live per manent un der sec re tary. Im sure theyll give you more than you need for your piece. But I was en joy ing talk ing to you. Youll get over it. You think? Lawrence smiled. He had curly black hair, quite glossy but cut dis con cert ing ly short around the back and sides. His suit, tooit was a good one; Ken zo, I thinkand it fit ted him well, but there was some thing ar rest ing about the way he wore it. He held his arms a lit tle away from his bodyas if the suit was the pelt of some suaver an imal, re cent ly slain and im per fect ly cured, so that the bloody raw ness of it made his skin crawl. They dont re al ly like me talk ing to the vis itors, said Lawrence. I dont think [rsqIve quite per fect ed the Home Of fice voice. I was sur prised to find my self laugh ing. We walked on down the cor ri dor. Some where in be tween the Crim inal Records Bu reau and the Foren sic Science Ser vice, the mood changed. Peo ple ran past us down the cor ri dor. A crowd clus tered around a tele vi sion mon itor. I no ticed the way Lawrence put a pro tec tive hand on the small of my back as he steered me through the sud den press of peo ple. It didnt feel in ap pro pri ate. I re al ized I was slow ing down to feel the pres sure of his hand on my back. BREAK ING NEWS, said the TV mon itor: HOME SEC RE TARY RE SIGNS. There was footage of the man look ing hag gard and climb ing with his guide dog in to the back seat of a tor ment that for the mo ment still re sem bled a min is te ri al car. Lawrence in clined his head to ward the oth ers, who were star ing rapt ly at the mon itor. He spoke close to my ear. Look at these bas tards, he whis pered. The mans be ing cru ci fied and these peo ple are al ready ex cit ed about what it means for their jobs. What about you? Dont you care? Lawrence grinned. Oh, its bad news for me, he whis pered. With my bril liant track record, I was next in line to be the mans guide dog. Lawrence took me to his of fice. He said he had to check his mes sages. I was ner vous, I dont know why. There wasnt any thing of Lawrence on the wallsjust a gener ic framed pho to of Wa ter loo Bridge, and a lam inat ed card show ing the mus ter ing points in the event of fire. I caught my self check ing my re flec tion in the win dow glass and then think ing, Oh dont be so sil ly. I let my eyes change their fo cus un til they rest ed on the flat gray wall of the neigh bor ing of fice build ing. I wait ed while Lawrence scrolled through his e-mails. He looked up. Im sor ry, he said. Were go ing to have to resched ule your in ter views. Itll be chaos around here for the next few days. The phone went and Lawrence lis tened for a mo ment. He said, What? Shouldnt some one more se nior be do ing that? Re al ly? Oh, great. How long do I have? He put the phone down on the ta ble and then he put his head down on the desk. In the cor ri dor out side the of fice there were sounds of laugh ing, shout ing, doors slam

ming shut. Bas tards, said Lawrence. What is it? That phone call? Off the record? Of course. I have to write a letter to the outgoing home secretary, expressing our departments deep regret at his leaving. They don't sound particularly regretful. And to think that but for your journalistic sensitivity to detail, we'd never have noticed. Lawrence rubbed his eyes and turned to his computer screen. He laid his fingers on the keyboard, then hesitated. God! he said. I mean, what do you write? Don't ask me. Did you know the man? Lawrence shook his head. I've been in rooms he was in, that's all. He was a twat, really, only you couldn't say that because he was blind. I suppose that's how he got so far. He used to lean slightly forward, with his hand on his guide dog's harness. He used to lean, like this, and his hand would sort of tremble. I think it was an act. He didn't tremble when he was reading Braille. You don't sound as if you'll miss him much either. Lawrence shrugged. I quite admired him. He was weak and he turned that in to a strength. A role model for losers like me. Oh, I said. You're doing self-deprecation. So? So, it doesn't work. Studies have shown. Women only pretend they like it in surveys. Maybe I'm only pretending to do self-deprecation. Maybe I'm a winner. Maybe becoming the Home Office press bitch was my own personal Everest. He said all this without facial inflection. He stared in to my eyes. I didn't know where to look. Let's bring this back to my article, I said. Yes, let's, said Lawrence. Because otherwise this is going somewhere else, isn't it? I felt adrenaline aching in my chest. This thing that was happening, then, it had apparently slipped quite subtly over some line. It had become something acknowledged, albeit in a relatively controlled form that both of us could still step back from. Here it was, if we wanted it, hanging from a taut umbilicus between us: an affair between adults, minute yet fully formed, with all its forbidden trysts and muffled paroxysms and shattering betrayals already present, like the buds of fingers and toes. I remember looking down at the carpet tiles in Lawrence's office. I can still see them now, with hyperreal clarity, every minute gray acrylic fiber of them, gleaming in the fluorescent light, coarse and glossy and tightly curled, lascivious, obscene, the gray pubic fuzz of an aging administrative body. I stared at them as if I had never seen carpet tiles before. I didn't want to meet Lawrence's eyes. Please, I said. Stop it. Lawrence blinked and inclined his head, innocently. Stop what? he said. And, just like that, for the moment, it was gone. I breathed again. Above us, one of the fluorescent tubes was buzzing loudly. Why did the home secretary have to resign? I said. Lawrence raised an eyebrow. Don't tell me you don't know. I thought you were a journalist. Not a serious one. Nixie does current affairs the way The Economist does shoes. On a need-to-know basis. & ["wldquo;The home secretary had to resign because he fast-tracked a visa for his lover's nanny. You believe that? I don't really care one way or the other. But he never seemed that stupid to me. Oh, listen to them. From outside Lawrence's door there was laughing and shouting. I heard the sound of paper being scrunched in to a ball. Feet scuffed on the carpet. A paper ball clanged in to a metal wastepaper basket. They're playing corridor football, said Lawrence. They're actually celebrating. You think they set him up? He sighed. I'll never know what they did to him, Sarah. I didn't go to the right schools for that. My job is just to write a good-bye letter to the man. What would you put? It's hard if you don't really know him. I suppose you'll just have to stick to generalities. Lawrence groaned. But I'm terrible at this, he said. I'm the sort of person who needs to know what I'm talking about. I can't just write some spiel. I looked around his office. I'm in the same position, I said. And like it or not, you seem to have become my interview. So? So, you're not making it easy for me. In what way? Well, you haven't exactly personalized this place, have you? No golf trophies, no family photos, nothing that gives me the slightest clue who you are. Lawrence looked up at me. Then I suppose you'll just have to stick to generalities, he said. I smiled. Nice, I said. Thank you. I felt the ache of adrenaline again. You really don't fit in here, do you? Listen, I very much doubt I'll still be working here tomorrow if I can't think of something suitably noncommittal to write to the old boss in the next twenty minutes. So write something. But seriously, I can't think of anything. I sighed. Shame. You seemed too nice to be such a loser. Lawrence grinned. Well, he said. You seemed quite beautiful enough to be so mistaken. I realized I was smiling back at him. A little blond of me, you think? Hmm. I think your roots are showing. Well I don't think you're a loser, if you must know. I think you're just unhappy. Oh, do you? With your gimlet eye for emotional cues? Yes, I do. Lawrence blinked and looked down at his keyboard. I realized he was blushing. Oh, sorry, I said. God, I shouldn't have said that. I got carried away, I don't even know you, I'm so sorry. You look really hurt. Maybe I'm just doing vulnerable. Lawrence drew in his elbows, drew in all of himself in fact, so that he appeared to withdraw in to his body on the royal-blue upholstery of his swivel chair. He paused, and tapped out a line on his computer. The keyboard was a cheap one, the kind where the keys have a high travel and they squeak on the downstroke. He sat there so long without moving that I went

be hind his desk and looked over his shoul der to see what he had writ ten. You tried your ut most and it has still to be seen\_ That was the un fin ished sen tence that stood, with out res olu tion or caveat, on his com put er screen. The cur sor blinked at the end of the line. From out side in the street, po lice sirens screamed in and out of phase. He turned to me. The bear ings squealed in his chair. So tell me some thing, he said. Yes? Is it your hus band who makes you un hap py? What? You dont know any thing about my hus band. It was one of the first things you said to me. About your hus band and his opin ions. Why would you men tion him to me at all? The sub ject came up. The sub ject of your hus band? You brought it up. I stopped, with my mouth open, try ing to re mem ber why he was wrong. Lawrence smiled, bit ter ly but with out mal ice. I think its be cause youre not very hap py ei ther, he said. I moved quick ly out from be hind his deskmy turn to blush nowand I went over to the win dow. I rolled my head on the cool glass and looked down at the or di nary life in the street. Lawrence came to stand be side me. So, he said. Now its me whos sor ry. I sup pose youll tell me I should leave the close ob ser va tion to you jour nal ists. I smiled, de spite my self. What was that line you were in the mid dle of writ ing? I said. You tried your ut most and it has still to be seenI dont know, Im go ing to say, still to be seen what great fruits your work will bear, or still to be seen what the suc cess es of your hard work will be. Some thing open-?end ed like that. Or you could just leave it how it is, I said. It isnt fin ished, said Lawrence. But its rather good, I said. Its got us thi [o;ss far, hasnt it? The cur sor blinked and my lips part ed and we kissed and kissed and kissed. I clung to him and whis pered in his ear. Af ter ward I re trieved my knick ers from the gray car pet tiles, and pulled them on un der my skirt. I smoothed down my blouse, and Lawrence sat back at his desk. I looked through the win dow at a dif fer ent world from the one I had left out there. Ive nev er done that be fore, I said. No, you havent, said Lawrence. Id have re mem bered. He stared at the screen for a full minute with the un fin ished line on it and then, with my lip stick still on his lips, smashed down a full stop. You tried your ut most and it has still to be seen. Twen ty min utes lat er, the let ter was tran scribed to Braille and put in the post. Lawrences col leagues hadnt cared enough to proof read it. An drew called. My mo bile went in Lawrences of fice and I will nev er for get the first thing An drew said: This is fuckin fan tas tic, Sarah. This sto ry is go ing to be full-?on for weeks. Theyve com mis sioned me to write an ex tend ed fea ture on the home sec re tarys down fall. This is pay dirt, Sarah. Theyve giv en me a team of re searchers. But Im go ing to be in the of fice all hours on this one. Youll be all right look ing af ter Char lie, wont you? I switched off the phone, very gen tly. It was sim pler than an nounc ing to An drew the change in our way of life. It was eas ier than ex plain ing to him: our mar riage has just been mor tal ly wound ed, quite by ac ci dent, by a gang of bul lies pick ing on a blind man. I put down the phone and I looked at Lawrence. Id re al ly like to see you again, I said. Ours was an of fice-?hours af fair. A long-?lunch es-?in-?short-?skirts af fair. A sneaked-?af ter noons-?in-?nice-?ho tels af fair. Even the oc ca sion al evening. An drew was pulling all-?nighters in the news pa pers of fices, and so long as I could find a babysit ter, Lawrence and I could do what we liked. Oc ca sion al ly in a lunch hour that had ex tend ed al most to teatime, with white wine in my hand and Lawrence naked be side me, I thought about all the jour nal ists who were not receiv ing guid ed tours, all the meet-?the-?me dia break fasts that were not get ting planned, and all the press re leas es that were wait ing on Lawrences com put er with the cur sor blink ing at the end of the last un fin ished sen tence. This new tar get rep re sents an oth er sig nif icant ad vance in the gov ern ments on go ing pro gram of\_ Hand ing out in-?flight meals in a plane crash. Thats what our af fair was meant to be. Lawrence and I es caped from our own tragedies and in to each other, and for six months Britain slowed in cre men tal ly dur ing nor mal of fice hours. I wish I could say thats all it was. Noth ing se ri ous. Noth ing sen ti men tal. Just a mer ci ful in ter rup tion. A brief, blink ing cur sor be fore our old sto ries re sumed. But it was gor geous. I gave my self com plete ly to Lawrence in a way that I nev er had with An drew. It hap pened eas ily, with out any ef fort on my part. I cried when we made love. It just hap pened; it wasnt an act. I held him till my arms ached and I felt ag onies of ten der ness. I nev er let him know. I nev er let him know, ei ther, that I scrolled through his Black Ber ry, read his e-?mails, read his mind while he slept. When I start ed the af fair, I think it could have been with any one. It was the af fa [t wir that was in evitable, not the spe cif ic man. But slow ly, I start ed to adore Lawrence. To have an af fair, I be gan to re al ize, was a rel ative ly mi nor trans gres sion. But to re al ly es cape from An drew, to re al ly be come my self, I had to go the whole way and fall in love. And again, I didnt have to make an ef fort to fall in love with Lawrence. All I had to do was to per mit my self to top ple. This is quite safe, I told my self: the psy che is made to absorb the shock of such falls. I still cried when we made love, but now I al so cried when we couldnt. It be came a source of wor ry, hid ing the af fair. The ac tu al assig na tions were sim ply con cealed from An drew, of course, and I made a point of nev er men tion ing An drew or his work

when I was with Lawrence, in case he him self got too cu ri ous. I put up a high fence around the af fair. In my mind I de clared it to be an oth er coun try and I po liced its bor der ruth less ly. Hard er to dis guise was the in con tro vert ible change in me. I felt won der ful. I had nev er felt less sen si ble, less se ri ous, less Sur rey. My skin start ed to glow. It was so bla tant that I tried to con ceal it with foun da tion, but it was no use: I sim ply ra di at ed joie de vivre. I start ed par ty ing again, as I hadnt since my ear ly twen ties. Lawrence got me in to all the Home Of fice events. The new home sec re tary loved to meet the me dia, to tell them over canapes how tough he was go ing to be. There were end less soirees, and al ways an af ter-?par ty. I met a new crowd. Ac tors, painters, busi ness peo ple. I felt a thrill I hadnt felt since before I met An drew the thrill of re al iz ing I was at trac tive, of know ing my self ir re sistible, of be ing half drunk on cham pagne and look ing around at the bright, smil ing faces and gig gling when I re al ized that sud den ly any thing could hap pen. So I should hard ly have been sur prised when it did. In evitably, at one of those par ties, I fi nal ly bumped in to my hus band, crum pled and red-?eyed from the of fice. An drew hat ed par ties I sup pose he was on ly there on some fact-?find ing mis sion. Lawrence even in tro duced us. A packed room. Mu sic flag ship British mu sic some band that had made it big on the in ter net. Lawrence, beam ing, flushed with cham pagne, his hand rest ing riski ly on the small of my back. Oh, hi! Hi! An drew O'Rourke, this is Sarah Sum mers. Sarah is the ed itor of Nix ie. An drews a colum nist for The Times, ter rif ic writ er, strong opin ions. Im sure you two are go ing to get on. So was the priest, said An drew. Im sor ry? He was sure we were go ing to get on. When he mar ried us. An drew, light heart ed, al most smil ing. Lawrence poor Lawrence quick ly re mov ing his hand from my back. An drew, notic ing. An drew, sud den ly unsmil ing. I didnt know youd be here, Sarah. Yes. Well. I. Oh. It was a last-?minute thing. The mag a zine you know. My body be tray ing me, blush ing from my an kles to the crown of my head. My child hood, my in ner Sur rey, re awak ened and venge ful, re draw ing its coun ty bound aries to an nex my new life. I looked down at my shoes. I looked up. An drew still there, stand ing very still, very qui et all the opin ion, for once, drained out of him. That night we stood on the emp ty foun da tion at the end of our gar den where An drew was plan ning to build his glass house, and we talked about sav ing our mar riage. Just the phrase is ex cru ci at ing. Ev ery thing An drew said sound ed like his Times col umn, and ev ery thing I said could have been ripped from the agony page of my mag a zine. At what point did we for get that mar riage is a com mit ment for life? I just felt so un ful filled, so down trod den. Hap pi ness isnt some thing one can pick up off the shelf, its some thing one has to work at. You bul lied me. I just nev er felt loved or sup port ed. Trust be tween adults is a hard-?won thing, a frag ile thing, so dif fi cult to re build. It was less like a dis cus sion and more like a ter ri ble mix-?up at the print ers. It didnt stop till I threw a flow er pot at him. It glanced off his shoul der and smashed on the con crete base and An drew flinched and walked away. He took the car and drove off and he didnt come home for six days. Lat er I found out hed flown over to Ire land to get prop er ly drunk with his broth er. Char lie start ed nurs ery that week, and An drew missed it. I made a cake to mark the oc ca sion for Char lie, alone in the kitchen one night. I wasnt used to be ing alone in the house. With Char lie asleep it was qui et. I could hear the black birds singing in the twi light. It was pleas ant, with out An drews con stant bass line of gripes and po lit ical com men tary. Like the drone note of bag pipes, one doesnt re al ly re al ize its been play ing un til it stops, and then the si lence emerges in to be ing as a tan gi ble thing in its own right: a su per si lence. I re mem ber scat ter ing yel low Smar ties over the wet ic ing while I lis tened to Book of the Week on Ra dio 4, and sud den ly feel ing so con fused I burst in to tears. I stared at my cake: three ba nana lay ers, with dried ba nana chips and ba nana ic ing. This was still two years be fore Char lies Bat man sum mer. At two years old, what Char lie loved most in the world was ba nanas. I re mem ber look ing at that cake and think ing: I love be ing Char lies moth er. What ev er hap pens now, that is the one thing I can be proud of. I stared at the cake on its wire tray on the work sur face. The phone rang. Lawrence said, Shall I come over? What, now? To my house? You said An drew was away. I shiv ered. Oh, good ness. I mean you dont even know where I live. Well, where do you live? Im in Kingston. Ill be there in forty min utes. No, Lawrence no. But why? No one will know, Sarah. I know but wait a minute, please, let me think. He wait ed. On the ra dio, the con ti nu ity an nounc er was promis ing great things for the next prog [ thram. Ap par ent ly there were many mis con cep tions about the tax cred it sys tem, and their pro gram was go ing to clear up a good few of them. I dug my nails in to the palm of my free hand and fought des per ate ly against the part of me that was point ing out that an evening in bed with Lawrence and a bot tle of Pouilly-?Fume might be more ex cit ing than Ra dio 4. No. Im sor ry. I wont let you come to my house. But why not? Be cause my house is me, Lawrence. Your house is your fam ily and my house is my fam ily and the day you come to my house is the day our lives get more tan gled up than Im ready for. I put the phone down. I

stood quietly for a few minutes, looking at it. I was doing this to protect Charlie, keeping the distance between me and Lawrence. It was the right thing to do. Things were complicated enough. Its something I could never have explained to my mother, I suppose: that there are circumstances in which we will allow men to enter our bodies but not our homes. My body still ached from the sound of Lawrences voice, and the frustration rose inside me until I picked up the phone and smashed it, again and again, into my perfectly iced cake. When the cake was quite destroyed I took a deep breath, switched the oven back on, and started making another. The next day Charlies first day at nursery my train was canceled so I was late back from work. Charlie was crying when I picked him up. He was the last child there, howling in the middle of the beeswaxed floor, smashing his little fists into the play leaders legs. When I went to Charlie, he wouldn't look at me. I pushed him home in the buggy, sat him down at the table, dimmed the lights, and brought in the banana cake with twenty burning candles. Charlie forgot he was sulking and started to smile. I kissed him, and helped to blow out the candles. Make a wish! I said. Charlies face clouded over again. Want Daddy, he said. Do you, Charlie? Do you really? Charlie nodded. His lower lip wobbled, and my heart wobbled with it. After the cake he got down from his high chair and toddled off to play with cars. A peculiar gait, toddling. A sort of teetering, really my son at two each step a hasty improvisation, a fall avoided by luck as much as by judgment. A sort of life on short legs. Later, with Charlie tucked up in bed, I phoned my husband. Charlie wants you back, Andrew. Silence. Andrew? Charlie does, does he? Yes. And what about you? Do you want me back? I want what Charlie wants. Andrews laugh down the phone bitter, despondent. You really know how to make a man feel special. Please. I know how badly Ive hurt you. But itll be different now. Youre bloody right itll be different. I cant raise our son alone, Andrew. Well, I cant raise my son with a slut for his mother. I gripped the phone, feeling a wave of terror rise through me. Andrew hadn't even raised his voice. A slut for his mother. Cold, technical, as if he had also weighed up adulteress, cuckold, and narcissist before selecting precisely the most appropriate noun. I tried to control my voice but I heard the shake in it. Please, Andrew. This is you and me and Charlie were talking about. I care so much about both of you, you cant imagine. What I did with Lawrence Im so sorry. Why did you do it? It was never meant to mean anything. It was just sex. The lie came out of my mouth so easily that I realized why it was so popular. Just sex? Thats the convention, isnt it, these days? Sex has become one of those words you can put just in front of. Anything else youd like to minimize at this time, Sarah? Just unfaithfulness? Just betrayal? Just breaking my fucking heart? Stop it, please, stop it! What can I do? What can I do to make it right again? Andrew said he didnt know. Andrew cried down the phone. These were two things he had never done. The not knowing, and the crying. Hearing Andrew weeping over the crackling phone line, I began to cry too. When we both dried up, there was silence. And this silence had a new quality in it: the knowledge that there had been something left to cry over, after all. The realization hung on the phone line. Tentative, like a life waiting to be written. Please, Andrew. Maybe we need a change of scenery. A fresh start. A pause. He cleared his throat. Yes. All right. We need to get away from things. We need to get away from London and our jobs and even Charlie we can leave him with my parents for a few days. We need a holiday. Andrew groaned. Oh, Jesus. A holiday? Yes. Andrew. Please. Jesus. All right. Where? The next day, I called him back. Ive got a freebie, Andrew Ibeno Beach in Nigeria, open-ended tickets. We can leave on Friday. This Friday? You can file your column before we leave, and youll be back in time for the next one. But Africa? Theres a beach, Andrew. Its raining here and its dry sea son there. Come on, lets get some sun. Nigeria, though? Why not Ibiza, or the Canaries? Dont be boring, Andrew [bor. Any way its just a beach holiday. Come on, how bad can it be? Serious times. Once they have rolled in, they hang over you like low cumulus. Thats how it was with me and Andrew, after we came back from Africa. Shock, then re crimination, then the two awful years of Andrews deepening depression, and the continuing affair with Lawrence that I never could quite seem to stop. I think I must have been depressed too, the whole time. You travel here and you travel there, trying to get out from under the cloud, and nothing works, and then one day you realize youve been carrying the weather around with you. Thats what I was explaining to Little Bee on the afternoon she came with me to pick up Batman from nursery. I sat with her, drinking tea at the kitchen table. You know, Bee, I was thinking about what you said, about staying. About us helping each other. I think youre right. I think we both need to move on. Little Bee nodded. Under the table, Batman was playing with a Batman action figure. It seemed the smaller Batman was engaged in a desperate battle with an unfinished bowl of corn flakes. I started explaining to Little Bee how I was going to help her. What Im going to do first is track down your case workeroh Charlie, food is not a toy track down your case worker and

find out where your documents are held. Then we can please Char lie, dont get those flakes ev ery where, dont make me tell you again then we can chal lenge your le gal sta tus, find out whether we can make an ap peal, and so on. I looked this up on the web and ap par ent ly Char lie! Please! If I have to pick up that spoon one more time I will take away your Bat man fig ure ap par ent ly if we can get you tem po rary res ident sta tus, I can ar range for you to take a British Cit izen ship Ex am, which is just sim ple stuff, re al ly Char lie! For gods sake! Right, thats it. Get out. Now! Out of the kitchen and come back when youve de cid ed to be good just sim ple stuff about the kings and queens and the En glish civ il war and so on, and Ill help you with the re vi sion, and then oh Char lie, oh goodness, Im sor ry, I didnt mean to make you cry. Im sor ry, Bat man. Im so sor ry. Come here. Bat man flinched away from my arms. His lip wob bled and his face went red and he howled, aban don ing him self ut ter ly to grief in that way on ly in fants and su per heroes hav e that way that knows mis ery is bot tom less and in sa ti able that hon est way. Lit tle Bee rubbed Bat mans head, and he buried his masked face in her leg. I watched his lit tle bat cape shak ing as he sobbed. Oh god, Bee, I said. Im sor ry, Im just a mess at the mo ment. Lit tle Bee smiled. Its okay, Sarah, its okay. The kitchen tap dripped. For some thing to do I got up and tight ened it, but the drips kept com ing. I couldnt un der stand why that up set me so much. Oh Bee, I said. Weve got to get a grip, both of us. We cant let our selves be the peo ple things hap pen to. Lat er, there was a knock at the front door. I pulled my self to geth er and went in through the house. I opened the door to Lawrence, suit ed, trav el bag slung over his shoul der. I saw his r [r. Elief, his in vol un tary smile when he saw me. I didnt know if Id got the right ad dress, he said. Im not sure you have. His smile dis ap peared. I thought youd be pleased. Ive on ly just put my hus band in the ground. We cant do this. What about your wife? Lawrence shrugged. I told Lin da I was go ing on a man age ment course, he said. Birm ing ham. Three days. Lead er ship. You think she be lieved you? I just thought you might need some sup port. Thanks, I said. Ive got some. He looked over my shoul der at Lit tle Bee, stand ing in the hall way. Thats her, is it? Shes stay ing for as long as she wants. Lawrence low ered his voice. Is she le gal? I dont think I give a shit. Do you? I work for the Home Of fice, Sarah. I could lose my job if I knew you were har bor ing an il le gal and I didnt do any thing about it. Tech ni cal ly, if I have the slight est doubt, I could be sacked if I even stepped through this door. Soumdont. Lawrence blushed, took a step back, and ran his hand through his hair. This isnt com fort able for me ei ther, Sarah. I dont like the way I feel about you. Itd be nice if I loved my wife and itd be su per if I didnt work for the forces of dark ness. I wish I could be ide al is tic like you. But thats not me, Sarah. I cant af ford to act as if Im some one. Im noth ing. Even my cov er sto ry is noth ing. Three days in Birm ing ham Birm ing ham, fuck! On a course to learn some thing ev ery one ac cepts Im hope less at. Its so plau si ble its trag ic, dont you think? Thats what I was think ing, even while I was mak ing it up. Im not ashamed of my adul tery, Sarah. Im ashamed of my fuck ing cov er sto ry. I smiled. I sort of re mem ber why I like you. No one could ev er ac cuse you of be ing full of your self, could they? Lawrence puffed up his cheeks and blew air through his mouth, sad ly. Not in the full light of the ev idence, he said. I hes itat ed. He reached up and held my hand. I closed my eyes and felt the re solve drain ing out of me in to the cold smooth ness of his skin. I took a step back in to the house. I al most stag gered, re al ly. Are you let ting me in then? Dont get used to it, I said. Lawrence grinned, but then he hes itat ed on the thresh old. He looked at Lit tle Bee. She came up and stood just be hind my shoul der. Do not wor ry about me, she said. Of fi cial ly you can not even see me. You are in Birm ing ham and I am in Nige ria. Lawrence gave a quick lit tle smile. I won der which of us will get found out first, he said. We went in through the hall and in to the liv ing room. Bat man was T-?bon ing his red fire en gine in to the side of a de fense less fam ily sa loon. (In Char lies world, I think, the emer gen cy ser vices are staffed by rogue el ements. ) He looked up when we came in. Bat man, this is Lawrence. Lawrence is Mum mys friend. Bat man stood and walked up to Lawrence. He stared at him. His bat sens es must have told him some thing. Is you mine new dad dy? he said. No, no, no, I said. Char lie looked con fused. Lawrence knelt so that his face was at Char lies lev el. No, Bat man, Im just your mum mys friend. Bat man tilt ed his head to one side. The ears on his bat hood flopped over. Is you a goody or a bad dy? he said slow ly. Lawrence grinned and stood up. Hon est ly, Bat man? I think Im one of those in no cent by standers you see in the back ground in the comics. Im just a man from a crowd scene. But is you a goody or a bad dy? Hes a goody of course, I said. Come on, Char lie. Do you re al ly think Id let some one in to our house who wasnt? Bat man fold ed his arms and set his lips in a grim line. No one spoke. From out side came the evening sounds of moth ers call ing nor mal chil dren in from gar dens for tea. Lat er, af ter Id got Char lie to bed, I made sup per while Lawrence and Lit tle Bee sat at the kitchen ta ble. Dig ging at the back of the cup board for a re fill of pep per, I found a half-?full pack et of the Amaret to bis cuits that An drew used to love. I

smelled them, secretly, holding the packet up to my nose, with my back to Lawrence and Little Bee. That sickly, sharp smell of apricot and almond made me think of the way Andrew used to wander around the house on his in some nights. He would return to bed in the small hours with that smell on his breath. Toward the end, the only thing keeping my husband going was six Amaretto biscuits and one tablet of Ciprallex a day. I held Andrews biscuits in my hand. I thought about throwing them away, and I found that I couldn't. How duplicious grief is, I thought. Here I am, too sentimental to throw away something that gave Andrew slight comfort, even as I cook supper for Lawrence. I felt horribly traitorous, suddenly. This is exactly why one shouldn't let ones lover in to ones home, I thought. When the supper was ready a mushroom omelet, slightly burned while I was thinking of Andrew, I sat down to eat with Lawrence and Little Bee. It was dreadful they wouldn't talk to each other, and I realized that they hadn't spoken the whole time I'd been making supper. We ate in silence, with just the sound of the cutlery. Finally Little Bee sighed, and rubbed her eyes, and went up stairs to the bed I'd made up for her in the guest room. I crashed the plates in to the dishwasher and dumped the frying pan in to the sink. What? said Lawrence. What did I do? You might have made an effort, I said. Yes, well. I thought I'd be alone with you tonight. It's not an easy situation to adjust to. She's my guest, Lawrence. The least you can do is be polite. I just don't think you know what youre getting yourself in to, Sarah. I don't think its healthy for you to have that girl staying here. Every time you see her, youre going to be reminded of what happened. Ive spent two years denying what happened on that beach. Ignoring it, letting it fester. Thats what Andrew did too, and it killed him in the end. Im not going to let it kill me and Charlie. Im going to help Little Bee, and make everything right, and then I can get on with my life. Yes, but what if you cant make it right? You know the most likely outcome for that girl, dont you? Theyll deport her. Im sure it wont come to that. Sarah, we have an entire department conscripted to ensuring that it will come to that. Officially Nigrias pretty safe, and shes got no family here, by her own admission. Theres bugger all reason for them to let her stay. I cant not try. Youll get dragged down by the bureaucracy, and then theyll send her home any way. Youll get hurt. It will damage you. And thats the last thing you need at the moment. You need positive influences in your life. Youve got a son that you have to bring up on your own now. You need people that are going to give you energy, not drain it away. And thats you, is it? Lawrence looked back at me, and shifted his weight forward. I want to be important to you, Sarah. Ive wanted it from the moment you walked in to my life with your reporters notepad that you never wrote down a single word on and your Dictaphone that you didnt even switch on. And I havent let you down, Sarah, have I? Despite everything. Despite my wife and despite your husband and despite bloody well every one. We have fun together, Sarah. Isnt that what you want? I sighed. I really dont think this is about having fun any more. And do you see me running away? This is about us doing whats best for you. Im not going to stop just because its gone all serious. But you have to choose. I cant help you if all your focus is on that girl. I felt the blood draining out of my face. I spoke as quietly and calmly as I could. Tell me youre not asking me to choose between you and her. I am absolutely not asking you to do that. But what I am saying is that youre going to have to choose between your life and her life. At some point you have to start thinking about a future for you and Charlie. Charity is lovely, Sarah, but there has to be some logical point where it stops. I banged my damaged hand down on the table, fingers splayed out. I cut off my finger for that girl. Will you tell me when is the logical point to stop something that started like that? Do you really want me to make a choice like that? I cut off my own bloody finger. Do you think I wouldnt cut you off too? Silence. Lawrence stood up. His chair scraped. Im sorry, he said. I shouldnt have come. No. Maybe you shouldnt. I sat at the kitchen table and listened to Lawrence taking his coat from the peg in the hall and picking up his travel bag. When I heard the front door opening, I stood up. Lawrence was halfway down the path by the time I got to the door. Lawrence? He turned. Where are you going to go? You cant go home. Oh. I didnt really think about it. Youre meant to be in Birmingham. He shrugged. Ill get a hotel. Itll be good for me. Ill read a book on leadership. Might actually learn something. Oh Lawrence, come here. I held out my arms to him. I pressed my face in to his neck and hugged him while he stood motionless. I breathed in the smell of him, and remembered all those hotel afternoons, high as kites on each other. You really are a loser, I said. I just feel so bloody silly. I had it all worked out. I got the time off work, I made up the story for Linda. I even bought toys for the kids, in case I forgot on the way home. I had it all worked out. I thought it was going to be a nice surprise for you and well. It was a surprise, at least, wasnt it? I stroked his face. Im sorry. Im sorry I snapped at you. Thank you for coming to see me. Please dont go to a hotel room and sit there all on your own, I cant bear it. Please stay. What? Now? Yes. Please. I



don't know if that's a good idea, Sarah. Maybe I need to take a step back and think about what we mean to each other. What you said just now, about cutting me off. Stop it, you cunning bastard. Stop it before I change my mind. Lawrence almost smiled. I linked my fingers around the back of his neck. What I didn't say was that if I had to cut you off, it would hurt more than cutting off my finger. He stared at me for a long time and then he said, Oh Sarah. We went up stairs and it wasn't until we'd started that I realized we were having sex on the bed I used to share with Andrew. I was concentrating on Lawrence, burying my face in the soft hair on his chest, peeling the clothes off him, and then something happened my bra strap snagged, Lawrence's belt buckle jammed for a second I don't recall but it stopped the flow, anyway, and I realized that Lawrence was lying on Andrew's side of the bed, that his skin was pressing down where Andrew had pressed, that the concave of Lawrence's back, smooth and hot with sweat, was arching proud of the depression that Andrew had made in the mattress. I hesitated I froze up. Lawrence sensed it, I suppose, and he kept the momentum going. He rolled over on to me. I just felt so grateful to him, I think, for getting us through that moment without thinking. I let myself dissolve in to the slickness of his skin, the delicacy of his movement, the lightness of him. Lawrence was tall but he was slight. There was none of the bruising compression of my pelvis, the crushing of the breath from my lungs, the overpowering gravity of sex with Andrew that left me groaning as much in resignation as in pleasure. That was what I loved about sex with Lawrence the glorious, giddy lightness of it. But there was something wrong, tonight. Maybe it was the presence of Andrew, so strong in the room. His books and papers were everywhere still jamming the bookshelves, scattered in the corners of the floor and when I thought of Andrew, I thought of Little Bee. Lawrence was making love to me and part of me was thinking, Uh, while another part was thinking, In the morning I must phone the Border and Immigration Agency and start to track down her papers, and then I'll need to find her a solicitor, and start an appeal procedure, and I found I couldn't give myself up to Lawrence not in that unhesitating, abandoned way I once had. Suddenly Lawrence seemed too light. His fingers barely brushed my skin, as if they were not engaging with my body but merely tracing lines in some fine and invisible dust that Africa had cloaked me in. And when his weight came on to me it was like being made love to by a summer cloud, or a winter butterfly by some creature in any case that lacked the authority to bend gravity around itself and become the moment's center. What's wrong, Sarah? I realized I was lying abso-lutely rigid. Oh god, I'm sorry. Lawrence stopped, and rolled on to his back. I took hold of his penis, but already I could feel the softness returning to it. Please, he said. Don't. I let go and took hold of his hand instead, but he pulled it free. I don't understand you, Sarah, I really don't. I'm sorry Lawrence. It's Andrew. It's just too soon. He never stopped us while he was alive. I thought about that. In the darkness outside, a low jet was climbing out of Heathrow and a pair of owls were calling to each other desperately above the roar, their shrieks shrilling against the whining of the turbines. You're right. It isn't Andrew. What is it, then? I don't know. I love you, Lawrence, I really do. It's just that I've got so much to do. For Little Bee? Yes. I can't relax. I can't stop running it over and over in my head. Lawrence sighed. So what about us? he said. Do you think you're going to find time for us again, one of these days? Oh, of course I will. You and me, we've got plenty of time, haven't we? We'll still be here in six weeks, six months, six years. We've got time to work this out. We've got time to work out how to be together, now that Andrew's gone. But Little Bee doesn't have that time. You said it yourself. If I can't fix things for her, they'll find her and they'll deport her. And she'll be gone, and that will be that. And what sort of a future would we have then? I wouldn't be able to look at you without thinking I should have done more to save her. Is that the future you want us to have? Oh god. Why can't you be like other people and just not give a shit? Leggy blonde, likes music and movies, seeks solvent man for friendship and maybe more? All right. I'm glad you're not one of them. But I don't want to lose you to a refugee girl who's really got no hope of staying here anyway. Oh, Lawrence. You're not going to lose me. But you might have to share me with her for a while. Lawrence laughed. What? I said. Well it's just typical, isn't it? These immigrants, they come over here, they take our women Lawrence was smiling but there was a guardedness in his...

Thank you. Thank you for not making this harder than it is. Lawrence stared at me, and his face was thin and sad in the orange glow of the street lamps filtering in through the yellow silk blinds. The flutter in my stomach surprised me, and I realized that the hairs on my arms were up. Sarah, he said, I honestly don't think you know how hard this is. Seven VERY EARLY THE NEXT morning, Sarah looked in to my room. I'm glad you're awake, she said. We've run out of milk for Charles' breakfast, so I'm popping down to the shop be-

fore he wakes up. Two min utes. Do you want to come? It was rain ing, so we went in Sarahs car. The wind screen wipers squeaked across the glass. Sarah chewed her lip be tween her teeth. Look, she said. Lawrence stay ing overnight. I re al ize it must look a bit sud den. So I want ed to have this chat with you. I just want ed you to un derstand. I laughed. Sarah was sur prised and she looked across at me. It is not hard to un derstand, I said. We are all try ing to be hap py in this world. I am hap py be cause I do not think the men will come to kill me to day. You are hap py be cause you can make your own choic es. And Lawrence is your choice, right? Sarah laughed and shook her head while she steered through the rain. Well, she said. That was a lot eas ier than I thought it would be. I smiled. It was good to see her laugh ing like this. I said to her, I do not think you are wrong for liv ing the life you were born in. A dog must be a dog and a wolf must be a wolf, that is the proverb in my coun try. Thats beau ti ful, said Sarah. Ac tu al ly that is not the proverb in my coun try. No? No! Why would we have a proverb with wolves in it? We have two hun dred proverbs about mon keys, three hun dred about cas sa va. We talk about what we know. But I have no ticed, in your coun try, I can say any thing so long as I say that is the proverb in my coun try. Then peo ple will nod their heads and look very se ri ous. Sarah laughed again. That is a good trick, she said. Isnt that what you say, Bee? I smiled. Hap pi ness for Sarah was a long fu ture where she could live the life of her choice. A dog must be a dog and a wolf must be a wolf and a bee must be a bee. And when they run out of milk, all Gods crea tures must go to the shop. Sarah looked across at me from the driv ing seat. Bless you for un der stand ing, she said. I un der stood, but Sarahs hap pi ness and Sarahs fu ture are more things I would have to ex plain to the girls from back home. A coun trys fu ture is found in its nat ural re sources. It is my coun trys big gest ex port. It leaves so quick ly through our sea ports, the girls from my vil lage could nev er even see it and they could not know what it looked like. Ac tu al ly the fu ture looks like gaso line. I dis cov ered this when I was read ing the news papers in the de ten tion cen ter, and fi nal ly I made sense of what had hap pened to me back home. What had hap pened was, the oil com pa nies had dis cov ered a huge re serve of the fu ture un der neath my vil lage. To be pre cise what they dis cov ered was crude oil, which is the fu ture be fore it has been re fined. It is like a dream of the fu ture, re al ly, and like any dream it ends with a rude awak en ing. The men came while we were prepar ing the evening meal, while the blue wood smoke mixed with the thick steam of the cas sa va pots in the gold en evening sun. It hap pened so quick ly that the wom en had to grab us chil dren cab and run with us in to the jun gle. We hid there while we lis tened to the screams of the men who stayed be hind to fight. On the dash board of Sarahs car, a light went on. Oh, she said. We need petrol. Wa ter sprayed up off the rainy road. Sarah turned the car in to a ser vice sta tion. We got out. There were no oth er cars. I lis tened to the rain beat ing down on the canopy above the gaso line pumps. Sarah looked at me as she held the gaso line hose. Do you still want to stay? she said. I nod ded. The gaso line flow ing through the pump made a high-?pitched sound, as if the scream ing of my fam ily was still dis solved in it. The noz zle of the gaso line hose went right in side the fu el tank of Sarahs car, so that the trans fer of the flu id was hid den. I still do not know what gaso line tru ly looks like. If it looks the way it smells on a rainy morn ing, then I sup pose it must flash like the most bril liant hap pi ness, so in tense that you would go blind or crazy if you even looked at it. Maybe that is why they do not let us see gaso line. When the fill ing was fin ished, Sarah went in side the ser vice-?sta tion shop to pay. She came out with a large plas tic bot tle of milk, and we drove back to the house. It was still on ly six thir ty in the morn ing. Sarah closed the front door be hind us and she yawned. Char lie wont be up for an hour at least, she said. I think I might go back to bed. I nod ded. Sarah smiled. On her face was a look of re lief. I re al ized: this is what you can do for her, Lit tle Bee. You can un derstand. I went in to the kitchen and I filled the ket tle to make my self a drink of tea. Un der stand ing. That would have been a good name for my vil lage, even be fore the men came to burn our huts and drill for oil. It would have been a good name for the clear ing around the lim ba tree where we chil dren swung on that bald old car tire, and bounced on the seats of my fa thers bro ken Peu geot and my un cles bro ken Mer cedes, with the springs pok ing out from them, and where we chant ed church songs from a hymn book with the cov ers miss ing and the pages held to geth er with tape. We knew what we had: we had noth ing. Your world and our world had come to this un der stand ing. Even the mis sion ar ies had board ed up their mis sion. They left us with the holy books that were not worth the ex pense of ship ping back to your coun try. In our vil lage our on ly Bible had all of its pages miss ing af ter the forty-?sixth verse of the twen ty-?sev enth chap ter of Matthew, so that the end of our re li gion, as far as any of us knew, was My God, my god, why hast thou for sak en me? We un der stood that this was the end of the sto ry. That is how we lived, hap pi ly and with out hope. I was very young then, and I did not miss hav ing a fu ture be cause I did not know I was en ti tled to one. From the rest of the world all we knew

was from that one old movie. About a man who was in a great hurry, some times in jet planes and some times on motor bikes and some times upside down. From the windup radios we had a little news, but mostly music. We also had a TV, but in Underground there was no reception and you had to make the programs your self. Our TV was just a wooden frame around where the screen used to be, and the frame sat in the red cat dust underneath the limba tree, and my sister Nkiruka used to put her head inside the frame to do the pictures. This is a good trick. I know now that we should have called this, reality television. My sister used to adjust the bow on her dress, and put a flower in her hair just so, and smile through the screen and say: Hello, this is the news from the British BBC, today ice cream will snow down from the sky and no one will have to walk to the river for water because the engineers will come from the city and put a stand pipe in the middle of the village. And the rest of us children, we would all sit in a half circle around the television set and we would watch Nkiruka announcing the news. We loved these dreams of hers. In the pleasant afternoon shade we would gasp with delight and all of us would say, Weh! One of the good things about Underground was that you could talk back to television. The rest of us children, we used to shout at Nkiruka: This ice-cream snow, exactly what time will it occur? In the early evening, of course, when the day is cooler. How do you know this, Madam Television Announcer? Because the day must be cool enough or the ice cream would melt, of course. Do you children know nothing? And we children would sit back and nod at one another evidently the day would need to be cool enough first. We were very satisfied with the television news. You can play the same trick with television in your country, but it is harder because the television sets do not listen. Early in the morning, after Sarah had gone back to bed when we came home from the service station, it was Charlie who wanted to turn the television on. He appeared in the kitchen in his bat costume and bare feet. I said, Good morning, little bat, do you want breakfast? He said, No, I doesn't want breakfast, I does want TELEVISION. So I said, Does your mum say it is okay for you to watch television before breakfast? Charlie looked at me and his eyes were very patient, like a teacher who has told you the answer three times already but you have forgotten it. Mum is asleep, actually, he said. So we went in to the next room and we switched on the television. We looked at the pictures without the sound. It was the BBC morning news, and they were showing pictures of the prime minister making a speech. Charlie put his head on one side to watch. The ears of his Batman hood flopped over. He said, That is the Joker, isn't it? No Charlie. That is the prime minister. Is he a goody or a bad guy? I thought to myself. Half the people think he is a goody and the other half think he is a bad guy. Charlie giggled. That's silly, he said. That is democracy, I said. If you did not have it, you would want it. We sat and watched the prime minister's lips moving. What's he saying? said Charlie. He is saying that he will make ice-cream snow. Charlie spun round to look at me. WHEN? he said. About three o'clock in the afternoon, if the weather is cool enough. He is also saying that young people who are running away from trouble in other countries will be allowed to stay in this country so long as they work hard and do not make any fuss. Charlie nodded. I think the prime minister is a goody. Because he will be kind to refugees? Charlie shook his head. Because of the ice-cream snow, he said. There was a laugh from the door. I turned around and Lawrence was there. He was wearing a bathrobe, and he stood there in his bare feet. I do not know how long he had been listening to us. Well, he said, we know how to buy that boy's vote. I looked at the floor. I was embarrassed that Lawrence had been standing there. Oh don't be shy, he said. You're great with Charlie. Come and have some breakfast. Okay, I said. Batman, do you want some breakfast? Charlie stared at Lawrence and then he shook his head, so I switched through the TV channels until we found the one that Charlie liked, and then I went in to the kitchen. Sarah's sleeping, said Lawrence. I suppose she needs the rest. Tea or coffee? Tea, thank you. Lawrence boiled the kettle and he made tea for both of us. He put my tea down on the table in front of me, carefully, and he turned the handle of the mug toward my hand. He sat down on the other side of the table, and smiled. The sun was lighting up the kitchen. It was thick yellow warm light, but not a show-off light. It did not want the glory for the illumination of the room. It made each object look as if it was glowing with a light from deep inside itself. Lawrence, the table with its clean blue cotton table cloth, his orange tea mug and my yellow one all of it glowing from within. The light made me feel very cheerful. I thought to myself, that is a good trick. But Lawrence was serious. Look, he said, I think you and I need to make a plan for your welfare. I'm going to be very clear about this. I think you should go to the local police and report yourself. I don't think it's right for you to expose Sarah to the stress of harbouring you. I smiled. I thought about Sarah harbouring me, as if I was a boat. Lawrence said, This isn't funny. But no one is looking for me. Why should I go to the police? I don't think it's right, your being here. I don't think it's good for Sarah at the moment. I

blew on my tea. The steam from it rose up in to the still air of the kitchen, and it glowed. Do you think you are good for Sarah at the moment, Lawrence? Yes. Yes I do. She is a good person. She saved my life. Lawrence smiled. I know Sarah very well, he said. She told me the whole story. So you must believe I am only staying here to help her. I'm not convinced you're the kind of help she needs. I am the kind of help that will look after her child like he was my own brother. I am the kind of help that will clean her house and wash her clothes and sing to her when she is sad. What kind of help are you, Lawrence? Maybe you are the kind of help that only arrives when it wants sexual intercourse. Lawrence smiled again. I'm not going to take offense at that, he said. You're one of those women who has a funny idea about men. I am one of those women who has seen men do things that are not funny. Oh please. This is Europe. Were a little more house-trained over here. Different from us, you think? If you must put it that way. I nodded. A wolf must be a wolf and a dog must be a dog. Is that what they say in your country? I smiled. Lawrence frowned. I don't get you, he said. If you understood how serious your situation is, I don't think you'd smile. I shrugged. If I could not smile, I think my situation would be even more serious. We drank tea and he watched me and I watched him. He had green eyes, green as the eyes of the girl in the yellow sari on the day they let us out of the detention center. He watched me without blinking. What will you do? I said. What will you do if I do not go to the police? Will I turn you in myself, you mean? I nodded. Lawrence tapped his fingers on the sides of his tea mug. I'll do what's best for Sarah, he said. The fear raced right through me, right in to my belly. I watched Lawrence's fingers tapping. His skin was white as a seabird's egg, and fragile like it too. He held his hands around his mug of tea. He had long, smooth fingers and they were curled around the orange china mug as if it was a baby animal that might do something foolish if it was allowed to escape. You are frightening me, Lawrence. I'm reacting to the situation, that's all. That's what Andrew didn't do. He was like a stuck record. He stuck to his principles and he let this thing with you overwhelm him and Sarah. That's why he lost her. I shook my head. Don't you have principles too? Lawrence sat forward in his chair. My principle is that I love Sarah. You can't imagine what she means to me. Apart from her, my life is utterly mundane. I'll do anything to keep Sarah. Anything, do you understand? You are worried I will take Sarah away from you. That is why you do not want me here. It is nothing to do with what is good for her. I'm worried Sarah's going to do something silly to try to help you. Change her focus, change her life more than she needs to right at this moment. And you are worried she will forget all about you in her new life. Yes, all right, yes. But you can't imagine what would happen to me if I lost Sarah. I'd fall apart. I'd hit the bottom. Bam. It'd be the end of me. That terrifies me, even if you think it sounds pathetic. I took a sip of tea. I tasted it very carefully. I shook my head. It is not pathetic. In my world death will come chasing. In your world it will start whispering in your ear to destroy yourself. I know this because it started whispering to me when I was in the detention center. Death is death, all of us are scared of it. Lawrence turned his tea mug around and around in his hands. Is it really death that you're running from? I mean, honestly? A lot of the people who come here, they're after a comfortable life. If they deport me to Nigeria, I will be arrested. If they find out who I am, and what I have seen, then the politicians will find a way to have me killed. Or if I am lucky, they will put me in prison. A lot of people who have seen what the oil companies do, they go to prison for a long time. Bad things happen in a Nigerian prison. If people ever get out, they do not feel like talking. Lawrence shook his head, slowly. But whatever's going to happen to you is going to happen eventually, whether I do anything or not. This isn't your country. They'll come for you, I promise you they will. They come for all of you in the end. You could hide me. Yeah right, like they hid Anne Frank in the attic. Look how that worked out for her. Who is Anne Frank? Lawrence closed his eyes and folded his hands behind his neck, and sighed. Another girl who wasn't my problem, he said. I felt a rage exploding inside me, so fierce that it made my eye balls hurt. I banged my hand down on the table and his eyes snapped open wide. Sarah would hate you, if you told the police about me! Sarah wouldn't know. I've seen how the immigration people work. They would come for you in the night. You wouldn't have time to tell Sarah. You wouldn't get to say a word. I stood up. I would find a way. I would find a way to tell her what you had done. And I would find a way to tell your wife too. I would break both of your lives, Lawrence. Your family life and your secret life. Lawrence looked surprised. He stood up and walked around the kitchen. He ran his hands through his hair. Yeah, he said, I really think you would. I would. Please do not imagine I would forgive you, Lawrence. I would make sure I hurt you. Lawrence looked out at the garden. Oh, he said. I waited. After a long time he said, It's funny. I've been lying awake all night thinking what to do about you. I thought about what would be best for Sarah, and what would be best for me. I honestly didn't even think about what you'd

do. I suppose I should have. I just assumed you wouldn't be so switched on. When Sarah talked about you I was imagining, I don't know, not some one like you, any way. I have been in your country two years. I learned your language and I learned your rules. I am more like you than me now. Lawrence laughed down his nose again. I really don't think you're anything like me, he said. He sat down at the kitchen table again, and held his head in his hands. I'm a shit, he said. I'm a loser, and you've got me over a barrel. He looked up at me. You won't really tell Linda, will you? His eyes were exhausted. I sighed and sat down opposite him. We should be friends, Lawrence. He laughed. I've just admitted to you that I'd sell you down the river if I could. You're the brave little refugee girl, and I'm the selfish bastard. I think our roles here are pretty clearly delineated, don't you? I shook my head. I am selfish too, you know. No, you're really not. Now you think I'm a sweet little girl, do you? In your mind you still don't think I really exist. It does not occur to you that I can be clever, like a white person. That I can be selfish, like a white person. I realized I was so angry I was shouting. Lawrence just laughed at me. Selfish! You? Took the last biscuit out of the tin, did you? Left the top off Sarah's toothpaste? I left Sarah's husband hanging in the air, I said. Lawrence stared at me. What? I swallowed more tea, but it was too cold now and I put the mug down on the table. The light in the kitchen was cooling too. I watched the glow fade from all the objects in the room, and I felt the cold flow in to my bones. All of the anger went out of me. Lawrence? Yes? Maybe it is better that I go somewhere else. Stop. Wait. What did you just tell me? Maybe you were right. Maybe it is better for Sarah and better for Charlie and better for you if I am not here. I could just run away. I am good at running, Lawrence. Shut up, said Lawrence quietly. He gripped my wrist. Stop it! That hurts! Then tell me what you've done. I do not want to tell you. I am frightened now. Me too. Talk. I held on to the edge of the table and I breathed in and out against my fear. Sarah said it was strange that I came on the day of Andrews funeral. Yes? It was not a coincidence. Lawrence let go of my arm and he stood up quickly and he put his hands on the back of his neck. He went to the kitchen window and stared out for a long time. Then he turned back to me. What happened? he whispered. I don't think I should tell you. I shouldn't have said anything. I was angry. Tell me. I looked down at the backs of my hands. I realized that I did want to tell someone, and I knew I could never tell Sarah. I looked up at him. I telephoned Andrew on the morning they let me out of the immigration detention center. I told him I was coming. Is that all? Then I walked here from the immigration detention center. I came in two days. I hid in the garden. I pointed through the window. There, I said, behind that bush where the cat is. Then I waited. I did not know what I wanted to do. I think I wanted to say thank you to Sarah for saving me, but also I wanted to punish Andrew for letting my sister be killed. And I did not know how to do either of these things, so I waited. I waited for two days and two nights and I did not have anything to eat, so I came out when it was dark and I ate the seeds from the bird feeder and I drank the water from the tap on the outside of the house. In the day time I watched through the windows of the house, and I listened when they came out in to the garden. I saw how Andrew talked to Sarah and Charlie. He was terrible. He was angry all the time. He would not play with Charlie. When Sarah talked, he just shrugged his shoulders or he shouted at her. But when he was alone, he did not stop shrugging or shouting. He would stand all alone at the end of the garden and talk to himself, and sometimes he would shout at himself, or hit himself on the head with the side of his fist, like this. He cried a lot. Some times he would fall down to his knees in the garden and weep for an hour. This is when I realized he was full of evil spirits. He was clinically depressed. It was very hard for Sarah. I think it was very hard for him too. I watched him for a long time. One time when he was weeping I watched him too hard and I forgot to hide myself, and he looked up and he saw me. I thought, Oh no, now this is it, Little Bee. But Andrew did not come to ward me. He stared at me and he said, Oh Jesus, you are not real, you are not there, just get out of my fucking head. And then he closed his eyes tight and he rubbed them, and while he was doing this I hid myself back behind the bush. When he opened his eyes he looked again where I had just been, but he did not see me. Then he went back to talking to himself. He thought he was hallucinating you? Poor bastard. Yes, but I did not feel sorry for him at first. It was only later. On the third day he came out in to the garden again, when Sarah was at work and Charlie was at the nursery. He was drunk, I think. His words were coming out slow and twisted. That would have been his medication, said Lawrence. His face had gone very white now, and he was still staring at me with his eyes very bright. Go on, he said. It was still early in the morning. Andrew started shouting. He said, Come out, come out, what do you want? I did not say anything. Please, he said. I know you are a ghost. What do you want to make you go away? I stepped out from behind the laurel bush and he took one step back. I am not a ghost, I said. He started hitting himself on the side of the head. He said, You are not re

al, you are in my head, you are not there. He closed his eyes and he shook his head. While he had his eyes closed I walked right up to him, close enough to touch. When he opened his eyes and saw how close I was, he screamed and he ran inside the house. I felt sorry for him then. I followed him in to the house. Please listen, I said. I am not a ghost. I came because I do not know any one else. Then he said, Touch me. Prove you are not a ghost. So I moved closer and I put my hand on his hand. When he felt my hand, he closed his eyes for a long time and then he opened them again. I walked up the stairs and he walked in front of me. He walked up the stairs backward. He was screaming. Get out! Get out! He ran in to his work room, his study, and he closed the door. So I stood outside the door and I shouted, Do not be afraid of me! I am only a human being! There was a very long silence, so I went away. Lawrence's hands were shaking. There were ripples on the surface of the tea in his cup. A little while later I came back. Andrew was standing on a chair in the middle of the room. What he had done, he had tied an electrical cable around the wooden beam in the ceiling. He had tied the other end around his neck. He looked at me and I looked at him. Then he whispered to me. He said, It was a long time ago, okay? A long way away. Why won't you just stay over there? So I said, I am sorry, it is not safe over there. And he said, I know you died over there. I know you're only in my head. He looked at me for a long time. His eyes were red and they were flickering around the room. I moved closer to him but he started shouting. He said, If you come closer I will step off this chair. So I stopped. I said, Why are you doing this? He answered in a very quiet voice. He said, Because I've seen the person I am. I said, But you are a good person, Andrew. You care about the way the world is. I read your articles, in The Times, when I was learning English. Andrew shook his head. He said, Words are nothing. The person I am is the person you see on that beach. He knows where the compass goes, but he wouldn't cut off one finger to save you. So I smiled at him and I said, It doesn't matter. Look, I am here, I am alive. And he thought about this for a long time. He said, What happened to the girl who was with you? So I said, She is fine. She could not come here with me, that is all. He looked in to my eyes then. He looked and looked, until I could not look him in the eyes any more and I had to look down at the floor. And then he said, Liar. Then he closed his eyes and he stepped off the chair. The noises he made from his throat, it was like the noises my sister made while they killed her. Lawrence held on to the kitchen work top. Shit, he said. I tried to help him but he was too heavy. I could not lift up his body. I tried until I was exhausted and I was crying but I could not take the weight off the cord. I pushed the chair under his legs but he kicked it away. After a long time he stopped struggling but he was still alive. I could see his eyes watching me. He was spinning round on the cord. He was turning very slowly, and each time his body turned to face me, his eyes followed me until he spun around too far. His eyes were bulging out and his face was purple, but he was watching me. I thought, I have to help him. I thought, I must call for the neighbors or I must call an ambulance. I started running down the stairs to get help. But then I thought, If I call for help, the authorities will know that I am here. And if the authorities know that I am here, they will deport me, or maybe even worse. Because here is something, Lawrence: after they let us out of the immigration detention center, one of the other girls I was with, she hanged herself too. I ran away from that place but the police must know I was there. Two hangings, you see? The police would be suspicious. They would think I had something to do with it. I could not let them find me like that. So I ran out of Andrew's study and I held my head in my hands and I tried to think what to do, whether I should give up my life to save Andrew's life. And first I thought, Of course I must save him, whatever it costs me, because he is a human being. And then I thought, Of course I must save myself, because I am a human being too. And then after I had been standing there for five minutes thinking these things, I realized it was too late and I had saved myself. And then I went to the refrigerator and ate, because I was very hungry. After that I went back down the far end of the garden to hide, and I did not come out until the funeral. My hands were shaking. Lawrence took a deep breath. His hands were shaking too. Oh god, this is serious, he said. This is very, very serious. Do you see now? Do you see why I want to help Sarah so much? Do you see why I want to help Charlie? I made the wrong choice, Lawrence. I let Andrew die. Now I must do everything I can to make things right. Lawrence was walking up and down the kitchen. He was holding the dressing gown closed around him, and his fingers were twisting on the cloth. He stopped and looked at me. Does Sarah know any of this? I shook my head. I am scared to tell her. I think if I tell her then she will make me go away from here, and then I will not be able to help her, and then there will be no way for me to make up for the bad thing I did. And if I can not make up for it, then I do not know what I will do. I can not run away again. There is nowhere to go. I have discovered the person I am and I do not like her. I am the same as Andrew. I am the same as you. I tried to save myself. Tell me, please, where is the refuge

from that? Lawrence stared at me. What you did is a crime, he said. Now I dont have a choice. I have to go to the po lice. I start ed to cry. Please, dont go to the po lice. They will take me away. I just want to help Sarah. Dont you want to help Sarah? I love Sarah, so dont fuck ing well talk to me about help ing her. Do you re al ly think it was help ful to come here? I was sob bing now. Please, I said. Please. There were tears run ning down my face. Lawrence slammed his hand down on the ta ble. Shit! he said. Im sor ry, Lawrence, Im sor ry. Lawrence slapped the palm of his hand against his fore head. Oh you fuck ing bitch, he said. I cant go to the po lice, can I? I cant let Sarah find out. Her head is fucked up enough about all this. If she knows you were there when An drew died, shell lose it. And it would be the end of me and her, of course it would. I couldnt go to the po lice with out Lin da find ing out. This would be all over the news pa pers. But I dont even want to think what this is go ing to be like, be ing with Sarah when I know this and she doesnt. And the po lice! Fuck! If I dont tell the po lice Im as cul pa ble as you are. What if it gets out and they re al ize I knew all along? Im the one whos been sleep ing with the dead mans wife, for fucks sake. Ive got mo tive. I could go to prison. If I dont pick up the phone and call the po lice, right now, then I could go to prison for you, Lit tle Bee. Do you un der stand that? I could go to prison for you when I dont even know your re al name. I fold ed my two hands over Lawrences hand and I looked up in to his face. I could not see him at all, just a pale shape against the light, blur ry with tears. Please. I have to stay here. I have to make up for what I did. Please, Lawrence. I will tell no body about you and Sarah, and you must tell no body about me. I am ask ing you to save me. I am ask ing you to save my life. Lawrence tried to pull his hand away but I held on to it. I put my fore head against his arm. Please, I said. We can be friends. We can save each oth er. Oh god, he said qui et ly, I wish you hadnt told me any of this. You made me tell you, Lawrence. I am sor ry. I know what I am ask ing you. I know it will hurt you to keep the truth from Sarah. It is like ask ing you to cut off a fin ger for me. Lawrence pulled his hand out from un der my hands. Then he took his hand away com plete ly. I sat at the ta ble ct a with my eyes closed and I felt the skin of my fore head itch ing where it had rest ed on his arm. It was qui et in the kitchen, and I wait ed. I do not know how long I wait ed for. I wait ed till my tears were dry and the ter ror in side me was all gone and the on ly thing left was a qui et, dull mis ery that made my head and my eye balls ache. There was no thought in my head, then. I was just wait ing. And then I felt Lawrences hands on my cheeks. He cupped my face in his hands. I did not know if I was sup posed to push his hands away or to place my hands up on his. We stayed like that for a lit tle while and Lawrences hands trem bled on my cheeks. He turned my face up to ward his, so I had to look into his eyes. I wish I could just make you dis ap pear, he said. But Im no body. Im just a civ il ser vant. I wont tell the po lice about you. Not if you keep qui et. But if you tell any one, ev er, about Sarah and me, or if you tell any one, ev er, about what hap pened with An drew, I will have you on a plane to Nige ria, I swear. It will be the last thing I do be fore my life falls apart. I breathed out one long, deep breath. I un der stand, I whis pered. Sarahs voice came from up stairs. Who said you could watch TV, Bat man? Lawrence took his hands away from my face and he went to make more tea. Sarah came in to the kitchen. She was yawn ing, and her eyes were screwed up against the sun light. Char lie came with her, hold ing her hand. I might as well tell you two grown-?ups the rules, said Sarah, since youre both new around here. Su per heroes, es pe cial ly Dark Knights, are not allowed to watch tele vi sion be fore theyve eat en their break fast. Are they, Bat man? Char lie grinned at her and shook his head. Right, said Sarah. Bat flakes or bat toast? Bat toast, said Char lie. Sarah went to the toast er and put two slices of bread in to it. Lawrence and I, we both just watched her. Sarah turned around. Is ev ery thing all right in here? she said. She looked at me. Have you been cry ing? It is noth ing, I said. I al ways cry in the morn ing. Sarah frowned at Lawrence. I hope youve been look ing af ter her. Of course, said Lawrence. Lit tle Bee and I have been get ting to know one an oth er. Sarah nod ded. Good, she said. Be cause we re al ly have to make this work. You both know that, dont you? She looked at each of us and then she yawned again, and she stretched her arms. Fresh start, she said. I looked at Lawrence and Lawrence looked at me. Now, said Sarah. Im go ing to take Char lie to nurs ery and then we can start to track down Lit tle Bees pa pers. Well find you a so lic itor first. I know a good one that we some times use on the mag a zine. Sarah smiled, and she went over to Lawrence.

And as for you, she said, Im go ing to find a lit tle time to thank you for com ing all the way to Birm ing ham. She put her hand up to Lawrences face, but then I think she re mem bered that Char lie was in the room and so she just brushed her hand against his shoul der in stead. I went in to the next room to watch the tele vi sion news with the sound turned off. The news an nounc er looked so much like my sis ter. My heart was over flow ing with things to say. But in your coun try, you can not talk back to the news. Eight I RE MEM BER THE

EX ACT day when Eng land be came me, when its con tours cleaved to the curves of my own body, when its in cli na tions be came my own. As a girl, on a bike ride through the Sur rey lanes, ped al ing in my cot ton dress through the hot fields blush ing with pop pies, free wheel ing down a sud den dip in to a cool wood ed sanc tum where a stream ran be neath the flint-?and-?brick bridge. Com ing to a stop, the brakes squeal ing from the work of pluck ing one still mo ment out of time. Throw ing my bi cy cle down in to a pun gent cush ion of cow pars ley and wild mint, and slid ing down the plung ing bank in to the clear cold wa ter, my san dals kick ing up a quick brown bloom of mud from the streambed, the min nows dart ing away in to the black pool of shade be neath the bridge. Press ing my face in to the wa ter, with time ut ter ly sus pend ed, drink ing in the cool shock. And then, look ing up and see ing a fox. He was sun ning him self on the far bank, watch ing me through a feath ery screen of bar ley. I looked back at him, and his am ber eyes held mine. The mo ment, the coun try: I real ized it was me. I found a soft patch of wild grass and corn flow er by the side of the bar ley field, and I lay down with my face close to the damp earth en smell of the grass roots, lis ten ing to the buzzing of the sum mer flies. I cried, but I didnt know why. The morn ing af ter Lawrence stayed overnight, I dropped off Char lie at nurs ery and I went home to see what I could do to help Lit tle Bee. I found her up stairs, watch ing tele vi sion with the sound turned off. She looked so sad. Whats wrong? I said. Lit tle Bee shrugged. Is ev ery thing okay with Lawrence? She looked away. What is it, then? Noth ing. Maybe youre home sick. I know I would be. Do you miss your coun try? She turned to look at me and her eyes were very solemn. Sarah, she said, I do not think I have left my coun try. I think it has trav eled with me. She turned back to the tele vi sion. Thats all right, I thought. Therell be plen ty of time to get through to her. I ti died the kitchen while Lawrence was show er ing. I made my self a cof fee and I re al ized, for the first time since An drew died, that I had tak en on ly one cup down from the cup board in stead of my in stinc tu al two. I stirred in the milk, th fe spoon clinked against the chi na, and I re al ized I was los ing the habit of be ing An drews wife. How strange, I thought. I smiled, and re al ized I felt strong enough to put in an ap pear ance at the mag aazine. At my usu al time the com muter train was crowd ed with pin-?stripes and lap top bags, but now it was ten thir ty in the morn ing and the train ran near ly empty. The boy op po site me stared at the car riages ceil ing. He wore an Eng land shirt and blue jeans, white with plas ter dust. Tat tooed on the in side of his forearm, in a Goth ic type face, were the words: THIS IS A TIME FOR HEROS. I stared at the tat tooat the fix ity of its pride and its bro ken gram mar. When I looked up the boy was watch ing me back, his am ber eyes calm and un blink ing. I blushed, and stared out of the win dow at the flick er ing back gar dens of the semis. The train braked as we neared Wa ter loo. There was a sen sa tion of be ing be tween worlds. The brake shoes squealed against the trains met al wheels and I felt eight years old again. Here I was, con verg ing with my mag aazine on un flinch ing rails. Soon I would ar rive at a ter mi nus and have to prove that I could step off this car riage and back in to my grown-?up job. When the train stopped I turned to say some thing to the boy with am ber eyes, but he had al ready stood from his seat and dis ap peared back in to the cov er of the bar ley field be neath the shade of the shel ter ing woods. I ar rived on the ed ito ri al floor at eleven thir ty. The place went qui et. All the girls stared at me. I smiled and clapped my hands. Come on, back to work! I said. When a hun dred thou sand ABC-1 ur ban pro fes sion al wom en be tween the ages of eigh teen and thir ty-?five lose fo cus then so will we, but not un til. At the far end of the open plan, Claris sa was sit ting be hind my desk. She stood when I walked over, and came around to the front. Her lip gloss was irides cent plum. She held her hands around mine. Oh Sarah, she said. You poor old thing. How are you cop ing? She was wear ing an aubergine shirt dress with a smooth black fish-?skin belt and glossy black knee-?high boots. I re al ized I was wear ing the jeans I had tak en Bat man to nurs ery in. Im fine, I said. Claris sa looked me up and down, and fur rowed her brow. Re al ly? she said. Re al ly. Oh. Well, thats great. I looked over my desk. Claris sas lap top sat in the cen ter, next to her Kel ly bag. My pa pers had been shunt ed to the far end. We didnt think youd be in, said Claris sa. You dont mind me usurp ing your throne, do you dar ling? I saw the way she had plugged her Black Ber ry in to my charg er. No, I said, of course not. We thought youd like us to get a head start on the Ju ly is sue. I was con scious of eyes watch ing us from all around the of fice. I smiled. Yes thats great, I said. Re al ly. So w ko;Rhat have we got so far? For this is sue? Wouldnt you like to sit down first? Let me get you a cof fee, you must feel ter ri ble. My hus band died, Claris sa. I am still alive. I have a son to look af ter and a mort gage to pay. Id just like to get straight back to work. Claris sa took a step back. Fine, she said. Well, weve got some great stuff. Its Hen ley month, of course, so were do ing an iron ic what-?not-?to-?wear for the re gat ta, which is a cun ning pre text for some pics of gor geous row ers, bi en evidem ment. For fash ion were do ing some thing called Fuck Your Boyfriendsee what we did there? Thats go ing to be girls with whips snarling at



boys in Duck ie Brown, ba si cal ly. And for the Re al Life slot theres two choic es. Ei ther we go with this piece called Beau ty and the Bud get about a wom an with two ug ly daugh ters and on ly enough mon ey to pay for cos met ic surgery for one of them. UghyesI know. Ormy pref er enceweve got a piece called Good Vi bra tions, and Im telling you, its an eye open er. I mean, my god, Sarah, some of the sex toys you can buy on line these days, theyre so lu tions to de sires I had no idea ex ist ed, god save us all. I closed my eyes and lis tened to the hum of the flu ores cent lights, the buzzing of fax ma chines, and the flu id chat ter of the ed ito ri al girls on their phones to fash ion hous es. It all seemed sud den ly in sane, like wear ing a lit tle green biki ni to an African war. I breathed out slow ly, and opened my eyes. So which piece do you want to go with? said Claris sa. Cos met ic co nun drum, or car nal cor nu copia? I walked over to the win dow and rolled my fore head against the glass. Please dont do that, Sarah. It makes me ner vous when you do that. Im think ing. I know, dar ling. Thats why it makes me ner vous, be cause I know what youre think ing. We have this ar gu ment ev ery month. But we have to run the sto ries peo ple read. You know we do. I shrugged. My son is con vinced he will lose all his pow ers if he takes off his Bat man cos tume. And your point is? That we can be de lud ed. That we can be mis tak en in our be liefs. You think I am? I dont know what to think any more, Clar. About the mag aazine, I mean. It all seems a bit un re al sud den ly. Of course it does, you poor thing. I dont even know why you came in to day. Its far too ear ly. I nod ded. Thats what Lawrence said too. You should lis ten to him. I do. Im lucky to have him, I re al ly am. I dont know what Id do oth er wise. Claris sa came and kissstood next to me at the win dow. Have you spo ken with him much, since An drew died? Hes at my house, I said. He showed up last night. He stayed overnight? Hes mar ried, isnt he? Dont be like that. He was a mar ried man be fore An drew died. Claris sa shiv ered. I know. Its just a bit creepy, thats all. Is it? Claris sa blew a strand of hair out of her eyes. Sud den, I sup pose I mean. Well it wasnt my idea, if you must know. In which case I re vert to my orig inal choice of word. Creepy. Now we both stood with our fore heads against the glass, look ing down at the traf fic. I ac tu al ly came here to talk about work, I said af ter a while. Fine. I want us to go back to the kind of ar ti cle we did while we were mak ing our name. Lets just, for once, put a re al-?life fea ture in the Re al Life slot. Thats all Im say ing. I wont let you talk me out of it this time. What, then? What kind of a fea ture? I want us to do a piece on refugees to the UK. Dont wor ry, we can do it in the style of the mag aazine. We can make it about wom en refugees if you like. Claris sa rolled her eyes. And yet some thing in your tone tells me youre not talk ing about wom en refugees with sex toys. I smiled. What if I said no? said Claris sa. I dont know. Tech ni cal ly, I sup pose, I could sack you. Claris sa thought for a mo ment. Why refugees? she said. Is this be cause youre still cross we didnt go with the Bagh dad wom an in the June is sue? I just think its an is sue that isnt go ing to go away. May, June, or any time soon. Fine, said Claris sa. Then she said, Would you re al ly sack me, dar ling? I dont know. Would you re al ly say no? I dont know. We stood for a long time. In the street be low, an Ital ian-?look ing boy was cy cling past the traf fic queue. Mid-?twen ties, shirt less and tanned, in short white ny lon shorts. Five, said Claris sa. Out of ten? Out of five, dar ling. I laughed. There are day k;Ths when I would cheer ful ly swap lives with you, Clar. Claris sa turned to me. I no ticed the very slight mark of foun da tion left on the win dow pane where her fore head had been. It hov ered like a light flesh-?toned cloud over the bone-?white spire of Christ Church Spi tal fields. Oh Sarah, said Claris sa. We go too far back to let one an oth er down. Youre the boss. Of course Ill get you a fea ture on refugees, if you re al ly want it. But I re al ly dont think you un der stand how quick ly peo ples eyes will glaze over. It isnt an is sue that af fects any ones own life, thats the prob lem. I felt a lurch ing ver ti go and I took a step back from the glass. Youll just have to find an an gle, I said shak ily. Claris sa stared at me. Youre be reaved, Sarah. Youre not think ing straight. Youre not ready to be back at work yet. You want my job, is that it Clar? She red dened. You didnt say that, she said. I sat down on the edge of the desk and mas saged my tem ples with my thumbs. No, I didnt. God. Im so sor ry. Any way, maybe you should have my job. Im los ing the plot, I re al ly am. I dont see the point in it any more. Claris sa sighed. I dont want your job, Sarah. She waved her long nails in the di rec tion of the ed ito ri al floor. Theyre still hun gry for it, Sarah. Maybe you should move on and let one of them have the job. Do you think they re al ly de serve it? Did we de serve it, at their age? I dont know, Claris sa. All I re mem ber is how bad ly I want ed it. Didnt it seem so thrilling, back then? I thought I could take on the world, I re al ly did. Make re al-?life is sues sexy. Be chal leng ing, re mem ber? The bloody name of our mag aazine, Clar. Re mem ber why we chose it? Nix ie, for heav ens sake. We were go ing to bring them in with sex and then im merse them in the is sues. We werent go ing to let any one teach us how to run a mag aazine. We were go ing to teach them, re mem ber? What ev er hap pened to us want ing that? What hap pened to want ing, Sarah, was get ting a few of the things we want ed. I

smiled, and sat down at my desk. I scrolled through the mocked-up pages on Clarissas screen. These are actually pretty good, I said. Of course they're good, darling, I've been doing the exact same story every single month for ten years. Cosmetic surgery and sex toys I can do with my eyes closed. I leaned back in the chair and closed my eyes. Clarissa put her hand on my shoulder. But seriously, Sarah? Mmm? kht= Please just give yourself a day to think about it, will you? The refugee piece, I mean. You're in a state at the moment, with everything that's happened. Why don't you take tomorrow off, just to make sure you're sure, and if you are sure then of course I'll make it happen for you. But if you're not sure, then let's not throw away our careers over it right now, okay darling? I opened my eyes. Okay, I said. I'll take a day. Clarissa sagged with relief. Thank you, doll. Because it's not so bad, what we do. Really. No one dies when we write about fashion. I looked out over the editorial floor and saw the girls watching me back: speculative, excited, predatory. I took another half-empty train back to Kingston and arrived home at two in the afternoon. It was hot and hazy, with a stillness and a heaviness to the day. We needed some rain to break it. Lawrence was in the kitchen when I got back home. I put the kettle on. Where's Bee? She's in the garden. I looked out and saw her, lying on the grass, at the far end of the garden beside the laurel bush. She seems okay to you? He just shrugged. What is it? You two really haven't hit it off, have you? It's not that, said Lawrence. There's a tension though, isn't there? I can feel it. I realized I had stirred one of the tea bags until it burst. I drained the mug in to the sink and started again. Lawrence stood behind me and put his arms around my waist. It's you who seems tense, he said. Is it work? I leaned my head backward on to his shoulder and sighed. Work was hideous, I said. I lasted forty minutes. I'm wondering if I should quit. He sighed in to the back of my neck. I knew it, he said. I knew something like this was coming. I looked out at Little Bee, lying on her back, watching the hazy sky filling in with gray. Do you remember what it felt like to be her age? Or Charles age? Do you remember back when you felt you could actually do something to make the world better? You're talking to the wrong man. I work for central government, remember? Actually doing something is the mistake we're trained to avoid. Stop it, Lawrence, I'm being serious. Did I ever think I could change the world? Is that your question? Yes. A bit, maybe. When I first joined the civil service, I suppose I was quite idealistic. When did it change? When I realized we weren't going to change the world. Certainly not if that involved implementing any computer systems. Round about lunchtime on the first day. I smiled and put my mouth close to Lawrence's ear. Well you've changed my world, I said. Lawrence swallowed. Yes, he said. Yes I suppose I have. Behind us the icemaker dropped another cube. We stood for a while and looked out at Little Bee. Look at her, I said. I'm so scared. Do you really think I can save her? Lawrence shrugged. Maybe you can. And don't take this the wrong way, but so what? Save her and there's a whole world of them behind her. A whole swarm of Little Bees, coming here to feed. Or to pollinate, I said. I think that's naive, said Lawrence. I think my features editor would agree with you. Lawrence massaged my shoulders and I closed my eyes. What's eating you? said Lawrence. I can't seem to use the magazine to make a difference, I said. But that's how it was conceived. It was meant to have an edge. It was never meant to be just another fashion rag. So what's stopping you? Every time we put in something deep and meaningful, the circulation drops. So people's lives are hard enough. You can see how they might not want to be reminded that every one else's lives are shit too. I suppose so. Maybe Andrew was right after all. Maybe I need to grow up and get a grown-ups job. Lawrence held me close. Or maybe you should relax for a little while and just enjoy what you've got. I looked out at the garden. The sky was darker now. It seemed the rain couldn't be far off. Little Bee has changed me, Lawrence. I can't look at her without thinking how shallow my life is. Sarah, you're talking about lute shit. We see the world's problems every day on television. Don't tell me this is the first time you've realized they're real. Don't tell me those people wouldn't swap lives with you if they could. Their lives are fucked up. But fucking up your life too? That isn't going to help them. Well I'm not helping them now, am I? How could you possibly do more? You cut off a finger to save that girl. And now you're sheltering her. Food, lodging. Fg, solicitornone of that comes cheap. You're taking down a good salary and you're spending it to help. Ten per cent. That's all I'm giving her. One finger in ten. Ten pounds in every hundred. Ten per cent is hardly a wholehearted commitment. Reevaluate that. Ten per cent is the cost of doing business. Ten per cent buys you a stable world to get on with your life in. Here, safe in the West. That's the way to think of it. If every one gave ten per cent, we wouldn't need to give asylum. You still want me to kick her out, don't you? Lawrence spun me round to look at him. There was something in his eyes that looked almost like panic, and at that moment it troubled me for reasons I could not fathom. No, he said. Absolutely not. You keep her and you look after her. But please, please don't throw your own life

away. I care about you too much for that. I care about us too much. Oh, I dont know, I re al ly dont. I sighed. I miss An drew, I said. Lawrence took his hands from my waist, and took a step back. Oh please, I said. That came out all wrong. I just mean, he was so good with the or di nary things. He was no non sense, you know? He would just say to me, Dont be so bloody fool ish, Sarah. Of course you shall keep your job. And I would feel aw ful be cause of the way he would talk to me, but I would keep my job and then of course hed turn out to be right, which was even worse in a way. But I miss him, Lawrence. Its fun ny how you can miss some one like that. Lawrence stood against the op po site counter, watch ing me. So what do you want from me? he said. You want me to start get ting on my high horse like An drew did? I smiled. Oh, come here, I said. I hugged him, and breathed in the soft, clean smell of his skin. Im be ing im pos si ble again, arent I? Youre be ing be reaved. Its go ing to take a while for all the pieces to fall in to place. Its good that youre tak ing a look at your life, re al ly it is, but I dont think you should rush in to any thing, you know? If you still feel like quit ting your job in six months time, then do it by all means. But right now your job is paying for you to do some thing worth while. It is pos si ble to do good things with an im per fect sit ua tion. God knows, I should know. I blinked back tears. Compromise, eh? Isnt it sad, ...

Maybe thats just de vel op ing as a per son, S kas arah. I sighed, and looked out at Lit tle Bee. Well, I said. Maybe this is a de vel op ing world. nine I WILL TELL YOU what hap pened, the day my sto ry changed. It be gan very ear ly in the morn ing, af ter the sec ond night Lawrence stayed at Sarahs house. It was still just dark. I was ly ing on the bed in the room Sarah gave me, but I was not sleep ing. I was try ing to see my fu ture, but I could not see it at all. Sarah came in to the room about the same time as the day light. How did you sleep? she said. I heard the owls call ing. Out side the win dow. Thats nice. Thats one of the good things about liv ing out of town. I rubbed my eyes and sat up on the bed. Sarah said, Im tak ing the day off work. I thought we could go in to Lon don. I dropped my hands back down on to the blan kets. I said, I like it here. Sarah shook her head. These are the sub urbs, she said. Noth ing ev er hap pens here. I said, That is why I like it. Dont be sil ly! Lets all go to Lon don. Its a beau ti ful day, well laze about on the South Bank and just watch the world go by. Char lie loves it there. Come on, itll be an ad ven ture for you. I stood up and I said, Okay. What is an ad ven ture? That de pends on where you are start ing from. Lit tle girls in your coun try, they hide in the gap be tween the wash ing ma chine and the re frig er ator and they make be lieve they are in the jun gle, with green snakes and mon keys all around them. Me and my sis ter, we used to hide in a gap in the jun gle, with green snakes and mon keys all around us, and make be lieve that we had a wash ing ma chine and a re frig er ator. You live in a world of machines and you dream of things with beat ing hearts. We dream of ma chines, be cause we see where beat ing hearts have left us. When we were chil dren, me and Nkiru ka, there was a place we went in the jun gle near our vil lage, a se cret place, and that was where we played hous es. The last time we went on that ad ven ture my big sis ter was ten years old and I was eight. We were al ready too old for the game and both of us knew it, but we agreed to dream our dream one last time so that we could fix it in to our mem ories, be fore we awoke from it for ev er. We crept out of our vil lage in the qui etest part of the night. It was the year be fore the trou ble first be gan with the oil, and two years be fore my sis ter started smil ing at the old er boys, so you can see that it was a peace ful time for our vil lage of Un der stand ing. There were no sen tries guard ing the road where the hous es end ed, and we walked out with no one to ask us where we were go ing. We did not walk out straight away, though. First we had to wait un til the rest of the vil lage was asleep. It took longer than n usu al be cause the moon was full, and so bright that it gleamed on the met al roofs and sparkled on the bowl of wa ter that me and my sis ter kept in our room to wash our faces with. The moon made the dogs and the old peo ple rest less, and there were long hours of bark ing and grum bling be fore si lence came to the last of the hous es. Me and Nkiru ka, we watched through the win dow un til the moon grew to an ex traor di nary size, so big that it filled the win dow frame. We could see the face of the man in the moon, so close that we could see the mad ness in his eyes. The moon made ev ery thing glow so bright ly it felt like day, and not an or di nary day at all but a baf fling day, an ex tra day, like the sixth toe of a cat or like a se cret mes sage that you find hid den be tween the pages of a book you have read many times be fore and found noth ing. The moon shone on the lim ba tree and it gleamed on the old bro ken Peu geot and it sparkled on the ghost of the Mer cedes. Ev ery thing glowed with this pale dark bright ness. That is when Nkiru ka and I walked out in to the night. The an imals and the birds were act ing strange ly. The mon keys were not howl ing and the night birds were qui et. We walked out through such a si lence, I am not jok ing, it was as if the lit tle sil ver clouds that drift ed across the face of the moon were lean ing down to the earth and

whispering, shhh. Nkiruka's eyes when she looked over at me, they were scared and excited at the same time. We held hands and we walked the mile through the cassava fields to the place where the jungle started. The paths of red earth between the rows of cassava, they gleamed in the moonlight like the rib bones of giants. When we reached the jungle it was silent and dark. We did not speak, we just walked in before we got too scared. We walked for a long time, and the path got narrower, and the leaves and the branches closed in on us tighter and tighter until we had to walk one behind the other. The branches began closing in on the path so that we had to crouch down. Soon we could not carry on at all. So Nkiruka said, this is not the right path, now we must turn around, and we turned around. But that is when we realized that we were not on a path at all, because the branches and the plants were still very tight all around us. We carried on for a little way, weaving around the plants, but very soon we realized we had missed the path and we were lost. Under the jungle it was so dark we could not see our own hands, and we held on to each other very close so we would not get separated. All around us now we could hear the noises of the jungle animals moving in the undergrowth, and of course they were very small animals, just rats and shrews and jungle pigs, but in the dark they became huge for us, as big as our fear and growing with it. We did not feel like pretending we had a refrigerator or a washing machine. It did not seem like the kind of night where such appliances would help. I started to cry because the darkness was complete and I did not think it would ever end. But Nkiruka, she held me close and she rocked me and she whispered to me, Do not be sad, little sister. What is my name? And through my sobs I said, Your name is Nkiruka. And my sister rubbed my head and she said, Yes, that is right. My name means the future is bright. See? Would our mother and our father have given me this name if it was not true? As long as you are with me, little sister, the darkness will not last for ever. I stopped crying then, and I fell asleep with my head on my sister's shoulder. I woke up before Nkiruka. I was cold, and it was dawn. The jungle birds were waking up and there was a pale light all around us, a thin gray-green light. All around us there were low fern plants and ground creepers, and the leaves were dripping with the dew. I stood up and took a few steps forward, because it seemed to me that the light was brighter in that direction. I pushed aside a low branch, and that is when I saw it. There was a very old jeep in the undergrowth. Its tires had rotted away to nothing and the creepers and the ferns were growing out through the arches of its wheels. The black plastic seats were tattered and the short rusty springs were poking out through them. Fungus was growing on the doors. The jeep was pointed away from me, and I walked closer. I saw that the jungle and the jeep had grown to gether, so that there was no telling where the one ended and the other began whether the jungle grew out of the jeep or the jeep grew out of the jungle. The footwells of the jeep were filled with the rotted leaves of many seasons, and all the jeeps metal had become the same dark color as the fallen leaves and the earth. Lying across the front seats there was the skeleton of a man. At first I did not see it because the skeleton was dressed in clothes the same color as the leaves, but the clothes were so torn and ragged that the white bones shone through them in the early-morning light. It looked as if the skeleton had become tired from driving and he had laid himself down across the two front seats to sleep. His skull lay on the dashboard, a little way apart from the rest of the skeleton. He was looking up at a small bright patch of sky, high above us through a gap in the forest canopy. I know this because the skull was wearing sunglasses and the sky was reflected in one of the lenses. A snail had crawled across this lens and eaten all the green mold and dirt off it, and it was in the glistering trail of this creature that the glass reflected the sky. Now the snail was halfway along one arm of the sunglasses. I went closer to look. The sunglasses had thin gold frames. On the corner of the lens that reflected the sky, the snail had crawled across the place where the glasses said Ray-Ban. I supposed that this had been the man's name, because I was young and my troubles had still not found me and I did not yet understand that there could be reasons for wearing a name that was not one's own. I stood and looked down at Ray-Ban's skull for a long time, watching my own face reflected in his sunglasses. I saw myself fixed in the landscape of my country: a young girl with tall dark trees and a small patch of sunlight. I stared for a long time, and the skull did not turn away and neither did I, and I understood that this is how it would always be for me. After a few minutes I walked back to my sister. The branches closed behind me. I did not understand why the jeep was there. I did not know that there had been a war in my country nearly thirty years before. The war, the roads, the order everything that had brought the jeep to that place had been overgrown by the jungle. I was eight years old and I thought that the jeep had grown up out of the ground, like the ferns and the tall trees all around us. I thought it had grown up quite naturally from a seed in the red soil of my country, as native as cassava. I knew that I did not want my sister to see it. I followed my steps back to the place where Nkiruka was still sleeping. I stroked her

cheek. Wake up, I said. The day has re turned. We can find the way home now. Nkiru ka smiled at me and sat up. She rubbed the sleep out of her eyes. There, she said. Didnt I tell you that the dark ness would not last for ev er? Is ev ery thing al right? said Sarah. I blinked and I looked around at the spare bed room. From the clean white walls and the green vel vet cur tains, I saw the jun gle creep ers shrink back in to the dark est cor ners of the room. You seemed miles off. Sor ry, I said. I still have not quite wo ken up. Sarah took my arm, and we went to find Char lie. Char lie was very ex cit ed when Sarah told him we were go ing on an ad ven ture. He said, Is we go ing to Gotham City? Sarah laughed. Are we go ing. Yes, Bat man, were go ing to Gotham City. In the Bat mo bile? Sarah opened her mouth to say yes but Lawrence was in the kitchen with us and he shook his head. No, lets take the bat train. Its a night mare try ing to park a Bat mo bile on a week day. Char lie looked dis ap point ed, but as soon as we were out of the door he raced ahead of us along the pave ment with his bat cape blow ing be hind him. It was the first time I had been on a train. Char lie was very proud to show me how to sit on the seat and to ex plain how he was driv ing the train. It looked com pli cat ed. There were a great many levers and but tons and switch es, al though none of them were vis ible to my eyes. Char lie drove the train to a sta tion called Wa ter loo and then the doors opened and a voice said, All change please, all change. Char lie moved his lips so that I would un der stand it was his voice. The sta tion was very crowd ed with the ghosts I saw the first time I was in Lon don. There were thou sands of them and they did not look at one an oth er in the eyes and they moved very fast but they nev er bumped in to one an oth er or even touched one an oth er at all. The ghosts seemed to know their routes exact ly, as if they were rac ing along un seen paths through the night and the jun gle that was clos ing in all around ev ery thing, clos ing in with the sound of men scream ing and the smoke of burn ing hous es. I shut my eyes tight to squeeze all that mem ory out of them. Sarah walked ahead of us, hold ing Char lies hand, and I walked be hind with Lawrence. We left the sta tion and we went out on to a bridge over a busy street. The day was very sun ny al ready. When we stepped out in to the light the heat and the roar of the traf fic and the sharp smell of the burned gaso line made me dizzy. Nice day for it, said Lawrence. Yes. Shall I point out the sights? Just over there, thats the Roy al Fes ti val Hall, and just to the rightover the top of that build ing? Those sort of cap sules, slow ly turn ing? Thats the Lon don Eye. The sun blazed on the see-?through skin of the cap sules. I do not feel like sight see ing, I said. How can you pre tend ev ery thing is nor mal be tween us? He shrugged. How else would you like me to talk? Youve got some thing on me, Ive got some thing on you. Its un pleas ant but were stuck with each oth er, so we might as well just s as get on with it. I do not think I can just pre tend it is okay. Well if you cant pre tend in Lon don, where can you pre tend? He sniffed, and put on a pair of sun glass es, and waved his hand at the street. I mean look, he said. Theres eight mil lion peo ple here pre tend ing the oth ers arent get ting on their nerves. I be lieve its called civ iliza tion. I pressed my nails in to the palms of my hands un til I felt them sharp er than my anger. We walked along for a while in si lence. I looked at all the faces as we passed them by. Once I saw my moth er, but when I looked more close ly she was some body elses. I did not know how I could feel so cold on such a hot and sun ny day. We were walk ing more quick ly now be cause Char lie was very ex cit ed and he kept run ning ahead, pulling on Sarahs arm to make her go faster. We came out from a dark pas sage way be tween two huge square con crete build ings, and there it was: the Riv er Thames, with all the build ings of Lon don spread out in a line of great pow er on the far bank. We pushed through the crowds across the wide stone walk way and we leaned on the iron rail ings to look out over the riv er. There was no wind, and the waves on the wa ter were small and silky. The light was very bright and there were pas sen gers sun ning them selves on the open tops of the plea sure boats that sailed be tween the bridges. Isnt this nice? said Sarah. Char lie climbed up on the iron rail ing and he stood next to his moth er, fir ing some un seen gun at the pas sen gers on the boats. The noise that this weapon made was choom-?choom-?choom and the ef fect that it had was to make the boat pas sen gers re lax in their bright white seats and lean their smil ing faces up into the blue sky and drink cool clear wa ter from bot tles. Lawrence stood be side Sarah and he put a hand on her shoul der. Char lie, Sarah, and Lawrence stood look ing over the riv er but I turned my back to it in anger. The peo ple here by the riv er were not like the ghosts from the train sta tion. They were walk ing slow ly. They were en joy ing them selves, and smil ing, and eat ing hot dogs and ice creams. Near to where we were stand ing, a man was sell ing sil ver bal loons, and sou venir post cards, and plas tic masks of the British Roy al Fam ily. The tourists wore these masks to have their pho tographs tak en with the Hous es of Par lia ment be hind them on the far side of the riv er, which made ev ery body laugh very much. With their fin gers some of them made the V-?for-?vic to ry sign in their pho tographs, and this made them laugh even more. The walk way was very wide, and the peo ple stopped in big groups to watch the street artists who were per form ing in

that place. There was a woman dressed all in gold, with a gold crown and gold paint on her face, and she stood on a gold box as still as a statue and only moved when money was dropped in to a hat in front of her. Next to her there was a man who had disguised himself to look like a lizard. He hid in a big black box and when money was dropped in to the top of the box he would pop out of it, whistling and snapping his hands to make the children laugh and squeal. I watched a little boy go to put a coin in to the top of the box. He moved forward very slowly and suspiciously, with the coin held out in front of him. This is exactly how you would approach a giant money-eating lizard in a box, in case the clever idea came in to his head to eat you up at the same time as the coin, and go home early with a belly full of boy instead of working all saturday for small change. The boy kept looking backward at his mother and his father, and they were smiling and urging him forward with an encouraging magic that they were pushing through the air to him with their hands, and they were saying to their boy, Go on, you can do it, go on. And I was looking very hard at these people, because this is how it was with them: the boy's father had dark skin, darker even than my own, and the boy's mother was a white woman. They were holding hands and smiling at their boy, whose skin was light brown. It was the color of the man and the woman joined in happiness. It was such a good color that tears came in to my eyes. I would not even try to explain this to the girls from back home because they would not believe it. If I told them that there were in this city children that were born of black and white parents, holding hands in the street and smiling with pride, they would only shake their heads and say, Little miss been-to is making up her tales again. But I saw it with my eyes. I saw the boy finally reach the big black box where the lizard man was hiding, and I saw him stretching up on his toes to release the coin he was holding in his fist, and I saw the coin tumbling through the bright blue sky with the sun shine flashing up on it and the Queen of England's face up on the coin with her lips moving and saying Good Lord, we appear to be falling and I saw the lizard man spring up out of his box and the boy run away giggling and screaming, and I saw his mother and his father lift him up, and I saw the three of them hugging one another tight and laughing while the crowd looked and laughed with them. This I saw with my own eyes, and when I looked around the crowd I saw that there was more of it. There were people in that crowd, and strolling along the walkway, from all of the different colors and nationalities of the earth. There were more races even than I recognized from the detention center. I stood with my back against the railings and my mouth open and I watched them walk past, more and more of them. And then I realized it. I said to myself, Little Bee, there is no them. This endless procession of people, walking along beside this great river, these people are you. All that time in the detention center I was trapped by walls, and all those days living at Sarah's house in a street full of white faces, I was trapped because I knew I could never go unnoticed. But now I understood that at last I could disappear in to the human race, like Yvette chose to do, as simply as a bee vanishes in to the hive. I did not even tell my feet to do it: they were full of joy and they took the first step all on their own. And then they stopped. I thought, Little Bee, you have tried this before. You ran away, but your troubles traveled with you. How will you stop them from finding you this time? How will you stop them from shrieking in the night? So I took a step back and I leaned against the railings again, to think. The sun was pleasant on the back of my neck. Lawrence was pointing out something to Charlie. Those columns on the bridge, he was saying. See how the water swirls around them? On the walkway in front of me, the crowd kept coming. The adults were all walking but many of the children were gliding. There were children with scooters, children with bicycles, children with wheels hidden in their shoes. I smiled at a beautiful woman with brightly colored clothes. Mothers were calling out their children's names strong names like Sophie and Joshua and Jack names with protecting something magic. And I thought to myself: that is it. My troubles will find me very easily in this town of stone and iron if I keep my foolish name that I chose at the edge of the jungle. So I will take a name that suits this city instead. I will blend in and I will wear a bright smile and colorful clothes and I will forget all about Charlie and Sarah and Lawrence and Andrew. With my new name, I will not even be long in Little Bee's story any more. Her story will end like this: One hot day in early summer Little Bee awoke weary from her troubles and she traveled to the banks of a great river in the company of three sorcerers a boy with the powers of a bat, a good sorceress who once saved her life on purpose, and a bad sorcerer. And as the three enchanters gazed up on the mighty river, Little Bee turned away and spoke some magic words to herself, and when the others turned around Little Bee had flown away, and when they searched for her she had gone, and there was nothing to tell that the young girl had ever existed in this world except for a man's large Hawaiian shirt that the good sorceress would wash and iron and fold at the back of a drawer because she would never be able to bear to throw it away. I smiled as I looked in to the

great crowd of people passing by, and my feet started again to take the first steps to join them. I smiled even brighter when I felt the strength of those steps. All the power of the city was flowing up through the warm stones beneath my feet and entering my body. Yes, I thought. This is the moment. Even for a girl like me, then, there comes a day when she can stop surviving and start living. To survive, you have to look good or talk good. But to end your story well there is the truth you have to talk yourself out of it. After six steps I was inside the crowd, getting pushed this way and that way. I did not mind and I did not look back. I let myself be taken along by this river of human souls that flowed beside the water. I was happy. I smelled the mud on the banks of the river and the dust of the gray pigeons' wings and the flat dry smell of the ancient stone buildings and the hot breath of cigarettes and chewing gum that floated through the crowd. Every one was talking and shouting in all the languages they had carried with them to release in that place, and the words mingled in the London air which under stood them all. I listened very carefully to the sound of the city and I wondered what name it would whisper me to call myself. The crowd took me up on to a bridge and I started to cross it. It was good to watch the passenger boats pass out of sight underneath my feet, with the people relaxing in their chairs, and the bald tops of the old men's heads turning pink in the sun, and the children shouting under the bridge to hear the echoes of their voices, and the tourist guide on the boats loudspeakers booming out, WELCOME WILLKOMMEN BIEN VENUE BIENVENUE TO BIENVENIDO A LONDRES. Near the middle of the bridge there was a boy selling magazines. He had a shaved head and a silver ring in his nose, like a bull, and a green coat with a fur hood even though it was so hot, and he had light brown skin and he smiled when he saw me staring at him. What? he said. I smiled back. Nothing. Big Is sue? he said. No, I said, I am going to be fine now, I think. sIt; The boy laughed. No! I mean, do you want to buy one of these? He spoke slowly and he held up a magazine. See? It's called, the Big Is sue. I giggled and I bit the side of my hand because I was embarrassed. Sorry, I said. I am new in this town. The boy nodded. Me too, he said. What's your name? I looked behind him at the huge city rising out of the river, mighty and illuminated. Then I looked back in the boy's eyes. My name is London Sunshine. The boy grinned. What kind of a name is that? It is the kind of name that starts off heavy but ends up light. The boy blinked at me, and the next moment we were both laughing together. This was a good trick. In this moment I very nearly named myself back to life. But while I was laughing I looked back across the river, and my eyes fell on something they could not look away from. Sarah and Charlie and Lawrence were still there, standing at the railings, talking and looking out over the river. They had not seen me, but I could not stop looking at them. The smile disappeared from my face. What's wrong? said the magazine-seller boy. Sarah and Lawrence had their arms around each other's shoulders, but Charlie was looking very small and sad. He was staring down at the mud on the banks of the river. He was firing some kind of a weapon at the mud, but the weapon was having no effect. I put my hand up to my mouth. You all right? said the magazine-seller boy. Looks like someone walked on your grave. I could not answer. How should I start to explain to him that I did not trust Lawrence? How was I supposed to tell him how all of the bad stories begin: The men came and they? It would be a long story to explain why I did not like to leave Charlie like that. I have to go, I said. I turned away from the magazine seller and I walked back across the bridge with heavy steps. When I got back to the place where the three of them were standing, Sarah turned and smiled at me. Where did you disappear to? she said. I shrugged. Nowhere. I looked down at the river. Something swam close to the bank but it did not break the surface. All you could see were the swirls in the water where it passed beneath. I looked at Sarah and she looked back at me and we found that we could not smile any more. What's wrong? She lowered her voice. I'm sorry. Is all this water reminding you of the beach? I said, It is only water. Charlie was pulling my hand. He wanted to play, so we went down some stone steps that were slimy with so s slime green river plant, down to a thin strip of yellow sand at the edge of the river. There were other children down there too, wearing just their underwear in the hot sun, building sand castles with their mothers and their fathers. We built sand castles too. We built towers and bridges. We built roads, railway lines, and schools. Then we built a hospital for injured superheroes and a hospital for sick bats, because Charlie said his city needed these things. Charlie was concentrating very hard. I said to him, Do you want to take off your Batman costume? But he shook his head. I am worried about you. You will be exhausted by this heat. Come on, aren't you too hot in your costume? Yes but if I am not in mine costume then I am not Batman. Do you need to be Batman all the time? Charlie nodded. Yes, because if I am not Batman all the time then mine Dad dies. Charlie looked down at the sand. He squeezed his fists so tight that I could see the small white bones of his knuckles through the skin. Charlie, I said. You think your dad died because you were not Batman? Charlie looked up.

Through the dark eye holes of his bat mask, I could see the tears in his eyes. I was at mine nurs ery, he said. Thats when the bad dies got mine Dad dy. His lip trem bled. I pulled him to ward me and I held him while he cried. I stared over his shoul der at the cold black drainage tun nels that dis ap peared in to the tall stone wall of the riv er em bank ment. I stared in to the black mouth of one of them, as wide as my shoul ders across, but all I could see was An drew spin ning slow ly round on the elec tri cal cord with his eyes watch ing me each time he re volved. The look in his eyes was the look of those black tun nels: there was no end to them. Lis ten Char lie, I said. Your dad dy did not die be cause you were not there. It is not your fault. Do you un der stand? You are a good boy, Char lie. It is not your fault at all. Char lie pulled him self out of my arms and looked at me. Why did mine Dad dy die? I thought about it. The bad dies got him, Char lie. But they are not the sort of bad dies Bat man can fight. They are the sort of bad dies that your dad dy had to fight in his heart and I have to fight in my heart. They are bad dies from in side. Char lie nod ded. Is there lots? Of what? Of bad dies from in side? I looked at the dark tun nels, and I shiv ered. Ev ery one has them, I said. Will we beat them? I nod ded. Of course we will. And they wont get me, will they? I smiled. No, Char lie, I dont think those bad dies will ev er get you. And they wont get you ei ther, will they? I sighed. Char lie, there are no bad dies here by the riv er. We are on an ad ven ture, okay? Maybe you can take one day off from be ing Bat man. Char lie frowned, as if this was an oth er trick of his en emies. Bat man is al ways Bat man, he said. I laughed, and we went back to build ing the city out of sand. I put a big hand ful on top of a pile that Char lie said was a mul ti sto ry Bat mo bile park. Some times I wish I could take one day off from be ing Lit tle Bee, I said. Char lie looked up at me. A drop of sweat fell from in side his bat mask. Why? Well, you see, it was hard to be come Lit tle Bee. I had to go through a lot of things. They kept me in prison and I had to train my self to think in a cer tain way, and to be strong, and to speak your lan guage the way you peo ple speak it. It is even an ef fort now just to keep it go ing. Be cause in side, you know, I am on ly a vil lage girl. I would like to be a vil lage girl again and do the things that vil lage girls do. I would like to laugh and smile at the boys. I would like to do fool ish things when the moon is full. And most of all, you know, I would like to use my re al name. Char lie paused with his spade in the air. But Lit tle Bee is yours re al name, he said. I shook my head. Mmm-?mmm. Lit tle Bee is on ly my su per hero name. I have a re al name too, like you have Char lie. Char lie stared. What is yours re al name? he said. I will tell you my re al name if you will take off your Bat man cos tume. Char lie frowned. Ac tu al ly I have to keep mine Bat man cos tume on for ev er, he said. I smiled. Okay, Bat man. Maybe an oth er time. Char lie start ed to build a sand wall be tween the wilder ness and the sub urbs of his city. Mmm, he said. Af ter a while Lawrence came down the green steps and walked up to us. Ill take over here, he said. Go up and see if you can talk some sense in to Sarah, will you? Why, what is wrong? Why didnt she come down here with you? Lawrence held his hands out with the palms up ward, and he sent air up ward out of his mouth so that his hair blew. Just go and see her, will you? he said. I walked up the steps. Sarah was still stand ing by the rail ings. That bloody man, she said when she saw me. Lawrence? Some times Im not so sure I wouldnt be bet ter off with out him. Oh, I don sh, ;t mean that, of course I dont. But hon est ly. Dont I have the right to talk about An drew? You were ar gu ing? Sarah sighed. Lawrence still isnt hap py about you be ing around. Its putting him on edge. What did you say, about An drew? Sarah looked out across the riv er. I told him I was sort ing out An draws of fice last night. You know, look ing through his files. I just want ed to see what bills Im meant to pay now, check we dont owe mon ey on any of our cards, that sort of thing. She looked at me. The thing is, it turns out An drew didnt stop think ing about what hap pened on the beach. I thought hed put it out of his mind, but he hadnt. He was re search ing it. There must have been two dozen fold ers in his of fice. Stuff about Nige ria. About the oil wars, and the atroc ities. Andwell, I had no idea how many of you end ed up in the UK af ter what hap pened to your vil lages. An drew had a whole binder full of doc uments about asy lum and deten tion. Did you read it? Sarah chewed her lip. Not all of it. He had enough in there to read for a month. And he had his own notes at tached to each doc ument. It was very metic ulous. Very An drew. There was so much de tail in there. I on ly read a cou ple of pa pers, but it was enough to see where he was go ing with it all. I read an in spec tors re port about the im mi gra tion de ten tion cen ters. How long did you say they kept you in that place, Bee? Two years. Oh Bee. I had no idea how hellish they are. I was imag in ing, I dont know, a sort of high-?se cu ri ty ho tel, I sup pose. Is it true they keep it de lib er ate ly cold in there? Is it true you have to ap ply in writ ing if you just need a parac eta mol? I smiled. If you are plan ning to have a headache, you need to ap ply twen ty-?four hours in ad vance. Sarah sighed. So it is true, then. An drew high light ed this one pas sage that said, We find the hu mil iat ing pro ce dures ex ces sive. We do not see how anyone could abuse an ex cess of san itary tow els. Did you re al ly have to ap ply for them too? I nod ded.



They would only give them to us one at a time. You had to fill in a form. Sarah twisted her hands together on the top bar of the iron railings. The thing is, she said, I think I know why Andrew highlighted that passage. I mean, people would skim-read the barred windows and the perimeter fence. But if you really wanted to bring it home, you'd show how a girl has to apply in writing for Ko Tex Ultra. Right? She stopped, and she looked down to where Lawrence and Charlie were laughing and kicking sand at each other. When she spoke again, her voice was quiet. I think Andrew was planning a book, she said. That's what I told Lawrence. I looked up at Sarah. That is why he was angry? Sarah nodded. I said I thought maybe I should carry s-l-s on Andrews work. You know, read through his notes. Find out a bit more about the detention centers. Maybe even, I don't know, write the book myself. You said all that to Lawrence? That's when he went ballistic. Sarah sighed. I think he's jealous of Andrew. We stood and looked out over the river for a long time. A breeze had started to blow. It was not much, but enough to darken the smooth surface of the river. Now, I thought. I gripped my hands on to the railings and tried to make the courage of the city flow in to my bones again. Sarah, I said. I want to tell you my feelings about Lawrence. She looked at me sharply. I know what you're going to tell me. You'll tell me he cares more about himself than he cares about me. You'll tell me to watch out for him. And I'll tell you that's just what men are like, but you're too young to know it yet, and so you and I will argue too, and then I really will be utterly miserable. So don't say it, okay? I shook my head. Please, Sarah. I don't want to hear it. I've chosen Lawrence. I'm thirty-two, Bee. If I want to make a stable life for Charlie, I have to start sticking with my choices. I didn't stick with Andrew, and now I know I should have. But now there's Lawrence. And he isn't perfect, you're right. But I can't just keep walking away. Sarah took a deep and shaking breath. At some point you just have to have to turn around and face your life head-on. She looked at me for a long time, and then she held on to me and we hugged each other tight. Oh Bee, said Sarah. We stood and held each other like that, and after we had been quiet for a long time Sarah stood up straight and swept back her hair. Go down and play with Charlie and Lawrence, she said. I have to make a phone call. I looked at Sarah and she smiled at me, and I walked back down the steps to the place Lawrence and Charlie were playing. They were picking up the small round stones from the edge of the mud and throwing them in to the river. When I came close, Charlie carried on throwing stones and Lawrence turned to me. Did you talk her out of it? he said. Out of what? Her book. She had some idea she was going to finish a book Andrew was writing. Didn't she tell you? Yes. She told me. I did not talk her out of the book but I did not talk her out of you either. Lawrence grinned. Good girl. See? We're going to get along after all. Is she still upset? Why hasn't she come down here with you? She is making a phone call. Fair enough. We stood there for a moment, looking at each other. You still think I'm a bastard, don't you? I shrugged. I'm not, said Lawrence. I'll even help you, if you help me. What help do you need from me? You could just go, Little Bee. Couldn't you? Quietly and without fuss. I already thought about that. So what's stopping you? Money? I can give you money. I looked down at my shoes and then I looked back up. You will pay me to go away? Don't make it sound like that. It isn't easy to get started in this country without money for food and rent. I don't want to put you on the streets, that's all. He was still holding a stone in his hand and I took it from between his fingers. It was warm and smooth and I turned it around and around in my hands, polishing it with the moisture in my palms. I said, What is your wife's name? Lawrence looked at his hands. Linda. And your children? Lawrence did not look in my eyes. So nia, he said. And Stephen. And Simon's the, um, the baby. Hmm. I weighed the stone and I turned it around and around between my fingers and then I dropped it on the sand. You should go back to them, I said. Lawrence looked at me then, and I felt a great sadness because there was nothing in his eyes. I looked away over the water. I looked and I saw the blue reflection of the sky. I stared for a long time now, because I understood that I was looking in to the eyes of death again, and death was still not looking away and neither could I. Then there was the barking of dogs. I jumped, and my eyes followed the sound and I felt relief, because I saw the dogs up on the walkway above us, and they were only fat yellow family dogs, out for a walk with their master. Then I saw Sarah, coming down the steps toward us. Her arms were hanging by her sides, and in one of her hands she held her mobile phone. She walked up to us, took a deep breath, and smiled. I called work, she said. I've got something to tell you both. She held out her hands to both of us, but then she hesitated. She looked all around the place where we were standing. Um, where's Charlie? she said. She said it very quietly, then she said it again, louder, looking at us this time. I looked all along the thin strip of sand. Children were still making their sand castles beside the river, although the level of the water was rising and the beach was getting narrower. None of the children was Charlie. 0% width=5%>Charlie? Sarah shouted. Charlie? Oh my god. CHARLIE! I spun

around under the hot sun. We ran up and down. We...

Charlie was gone. Oh my god! said Sarah. Someone taken him! Oh my god! CHARLIE! Horror filled me completely, so that I could not even move. While Sarah screamed for her child I widened my eyes into the blackness of the drainage tunnels in the embankment wall, and I stared into them. I looked for a long time. I saw that the night horrors of all our worlds had found one another, so that there was no telling where the one ended and the other began whether the jungle grew out of the jeep or the jeep grew out of the jungle. Then I HELD LITTLE BEE for a long time. Then I asked her: Will you go down and play with Charlie and Lawrence? I have to make a phone call. After she walked down the stone steps, I held on to the iron railing of the embankment and I held on to my memories of Andrew and I held on to my mobile phone. The phone was shaking in my hand, showing five bars of signal. The reception was so strong in the center of London, one hardly needed the handset at all. The air positively crackled with connectivity, as if one might simply direct a thought at someone and be received loud and clear. My tummy lurched and I decided, Right, I'll do it now, before I calm down and change my mind. I called the publisher and told him I didn't want to edit his magazine any more. What the publisher said was, Fine. I said, I'm not sure you heard me. Something extraordinary has happened in my life, and I really need to run with it. So I need to quit the job. And he said, Yeah, I heard you, that's fine, I'll get someone else. And he hung up. And I said, Oh. I stood there for a minute, shocked, and then I just had to smile. The sun was lovely. I closed my eyes and let the breeze air-brush away the traces of the last few years. One phone call: I realized it was as simple as that. People wonder how they are ever going to change their lives, but really it is frighteningly easy. I was already thinking about how I might carry on with Andrew's book. The trick, of course, would be to keep it impersonal. I wondered if that had been a problem for Andrew. He never liked to put himself in the story. But what if the story is that we are in the story? I started to understand how Andrew must have agonized over it. I wondered if that was why he had kept so quiet. Dear Andrew, I thought. How is it that I feel closer to you now than I did on the day we were married? And after I just told Little Bee I didn't want to hear what she had to say because I know I need to stick with Lawrence. This is the forked tongue of grief again. It whispers in one ear: return to what you once loved best, and in the other ear it whispers v, move on. My phone went, and my eyes snapped open. It was Clarissa. Sarah? They just told me you're signed. Are you crazy? I told you I was thinking about it. Sarah, I spend a lot of time thinking about bedding Premiership footballers. Maybe you should try it. Or maybe you should come in to the office, right now, and tell the publishers you're very sorry, and that you're going through a bereavement at the moment, and please pretty please could you have your nice job back. But I don't want that job. I want to be a journalist again. I want to make a difference in the world. Every one wants to make a difference, Sarah, but there's a time and place. Do you know what you're doing, honestly, if you throw your toys out of the pram like this? You're just having a midlife crisis. You're no different from the middle-aged man who buys a red car and shags the babysitter. I thought about it. The breeze seemed colder now. There were goose bumps on my arms. Sarah? Oh Clarissa, you're right, I'm confused. Do you think I've just chucked my life away? I just want you to think about it. Will you, Sarah? All right. And call me? I will. Clarissa? Darling? Thank you. I hung up and looked out over the river. When we first arrived the water had been flowing downstream toward the wild estuary and the untamed waters of the North Sea. Now it was nudging back in the direction of Oxford and the crisp white boathouses of Henley. It is hard, when it comes right down to the actual choice, to know what you want out of life. I went down the stone steps to the little shrinking beach. I said to Lawrence and Little Bee, I called work. I've got something to tell you both. But they looked so forlorn, standing there, standing apart from each other, not speaking. I realized this was never going to work. I thought, Oh gosh, how foolish I've been. I have always struck myself as a very practical woman, capable of adaptation. I immediately thought, I'll phone the publisher and tell him I made a mistake. And not just a little mistake but a great, elemental, whole-life mistake. During one whole week of grace I utterly forgot, you see, that I was a sensible girl from Surrey. It was something about Little Bee's smile, and her energy, that made me sort of fall in love with her. And thus love makes fools of us all. For a whole week I actually thought I was a better person, someone who could make a difference. It completely slipped my mind that I was a quiet, practical, bereaved woman who focused very hard on her job. Isn't that obvious? I'm awfully sorry. And now might I please have my old life back? I held out my hands to Little Bee and Lawrence, but then I noticed that Charlie was no longer with them. Um, where's Charlie? It is painful to think about this time, even now. What did I do? I looked all

around, of course. I ran up and down. I began screaming Charlie's name. I raced up and down the shrinking beach, staring in to the face of every child playing there in case it should somehow transform into mine. I shouted myself hoarse. My son was nowhere. An aching panic took me over. The sophisticated parts of my mind shut down, the parts that might be capable of thought. I suppose the blood supply to them had been summarily turned off, and diverted to the eyes, the legs, the lungs. I looked, I ran, I screamed. And all the time in my heart it was growing: the unspeakable certainty that someone had taken Charlie. At the other end of the little beach was a second set of steps leading up the embankment wall, and I ran up them. Camped out on the top step was a picnic family. The mother long auburn hair with rather frazzled ends sat cross-legged and barefoot, surrounded by the peelings and the uneaten segments of satsumas. She was reading BBC Music Magazine. She had it spread out on the rug, pinned down with one foot to stop the pages blowing. There was a slender silver ring on her second toe. Beside her on the step, two flame-haired girls in blue gingham dresses were eating Kraft cheese slices straight from the packet. The husband, blond and stocky, stood a few feet away, leaning on the railing and talking in to his mobile. Lanzarote's just a tourist trap these days, he was saying. You should go somewhere off the beaten track, like Croatia or Marakech. Your money goes further there in any case. I was out of breath. The mother looked up at me. Is everything all right? she said. I've lost my son. She looked at me blankly. I smiled idiotically. I didn't know what to do with my face. My mind and my body were keyed up to fight with peepholes and wolves. Confronted with these ordinary people in this absurdly pleasant tableau, ringed all around by strolling tourists, my distress seemed desperate and vulgar. My social conditioning fought against my panic. I felt ashamed. Instinctively, I also knew that I needed to speak to the woman calmly, in her register, if I was to communicate clearly and get across the information I needed without wasting any time. I have struggled all my life to find the correct point of balance between nicety and hysteria. I'm very sorry, I said, I've lost my son. The woman stood up and looked around at the crowd. I couldn't understand why her movements were so slow. It seemed that I was operating in air, while she occupied some more visible medium. He's about this high, I said. You'd have noticed him, he's dressed as Batman. Did he come up these steps? I'm sorry, she said in slow motion. I haven't seen anything. Each word took forever to form. It felt like waiting for the woman to engrave the sentence in stone. I was already halfway back down the steps before she finished speaking. Behind me I heard the husband saying, You could always go for the cheapest package tour and just use the flights. Then you can find some nicer accommodation once you're out there. I ran back down the steps, shouting Charlie's name. Somehow I arrived back at the place where Charlie had built his sandcastles. I kicked the structures apart, shouting his name. While parents and children looked on aghast, I looked for my son under piles of sand as little as six inches high. Of course I knew Charlie wasn't underneath. I knew, even as I was scrambling away at anything that protruded. I found an old crisp packet. The broken wheel of a pushchair. My nails bled in to a barely submerged history of tides. Little Bee and Lawrence stared at me, wide-eyed, and I remember the last rational thought that went through my mind: He isn't on the sand, and he didn't go up the steps, so he must be in the river. Even as I thought it, I could feel the second stage of my mind shutting down. The panic simply rose up out of my chest to engulf me. I splashed out in to the Thames, knee-high, then waist-high, staring down in to the muddy brown water, screaming Charlie's name at the floating plastic bags and the startled gulls. I saw something under the water, lying on the muddy sludge. Underwater, distorted by ripples, it looked like a bone-white face. I reached down and grabbed for it. I lifted it up in to the bright day. It was a cracked plastic mask from a tourist stand, with its snapped elastic showing how it had blown in to the river. As I held it up, dripping muddy water, I realized that my phone had been in the hand I held the mask in. My phone was gone, somewhere my life was gone, lost in the sand or the river. I stood in the water, holding a mask. I didn't know what to do now. I heard a whistling sound and I looked down sharply. I understood that the breeze was whistling through the empty eye holes of the mask, and that is when I truly began to scream. Charlie O'Rourke. Four years old. Batman. What went through my mind? His perfect little white teeth. His look of fierce concentration when he was dispatching bad dies. The way he hugged me, once, when I was sad. The way, since Africa, that I had been running between worlds between Andrew and Lawrence, between Little Bee and my job running everywhere except to the world where I belonged. Why had I never run to Charlie? I screamed at myself. My son, my beautiful boy. Gone, gone. He had disappeared as he had lived, while I was looking the other way. I looked at the empty days before me, and there was no end to them. My voice sank to a whisper. I breathed Charlie's name. Then I felt hands on my shoulders. It was Lawrence. We need to be systemat

ic about this now, he said. Sarah, you stay here and keep call ing for him, so he knows where to come back to if hes wan dering. Ill go and ask peo ple to start look ing, and Ill keep look ing my self. And Bee, you take my phone and you go up on the em bank ment and you call the po lice. Then you wait for them, so you can show them where we are when they ar rive. Lawrence hand ed his phone to Lit tle Bee, and turned back to me. I stared at him dumb ly. I know it sounds ex treme, he said, but the po lice are good at this. Im sure well find Char lie be fore they get here, but just on the off chance that we dont, i {dont makes sense for us to bring them in soon er rather than lat er. Okay, do it, I said. Do it now. Lit tle Bee was still stand ing there, hold ing Lawrences phone in her hand, star ing at Lawrence and me with large and fright ened eyes. I couldnt un derstand why she wasnt al ready run ning. Go! I said. She still stared at me. The po lice, she said. Un der stand ing buzzed dul ly in my mind. The num ber. Of course! She didnt know the emer gen cy num ber. The num ber is 999, I said. She just stood there. I couldnt work out what the prob lem was. The po lice, Sarah, she said. I stared at her. Her eyes were plead ing. She looked ter ri fied. And then, very slow ly, her face changed. It be came firm, re solved. She took a deep breath, and she nod ded at me. She turned, slow ly at first and then very fast, and she ran up the steps to the em bank ment. When she was halfway up, Lawrence raised a hand to his mouth. Oh shit, the po lice, he said. What? He shook his head. Nev er mind. Lawrence ran off. I be gan shout ing again for Char lie. I called and called, while the tourists stared, and the breeze left me shiv er ing in my wet jeans. At first I called out Char lies name as a sound for him to home in on, but as my voice be gan to go I re al ized that an oth er line had been crossed and I was shouting the name just to hear it, to en sure its con tin uing ex is tence. I re al ized that the name was all I had in the world. Then a voice came from be hind me. It was Lawrence. Sarah? he said. Its okay. I found him. Lawrence held Char lie in his arms. My son was filthy, and his bat cape hung straight down, heavy with wa ter. I ran to him, took him in to my arms and held him. I pressed my face in to his neck and I breathed in his smell, the sharp salt of his sweat and the sew er tang of the dirt. The tears streamed down my face. Char lie, I whis pered. Oh my world, my whole world. Get off, Mum my! Youre squash ing me! Where were you? Char lie held out his hands to the sides, palms up ward, and an swered me as if I was sim ple. In mine bat cave. Lawrence grinned and point ed at the wall of the em bank ment. He was right in side one of those drainage pipes. Oh Char lie. Didnt you hear us all shout ing? Didnt you see us all look ing for you? Char lie grinned be neath his bat mask. I was hid ing, he said. Why? Why didnt you come out? Couldnt you see how wor ried we all were? My son looked for lorn ly at the ground. Lawrence and Bee was all cross and they wasnt play ing with me. So I went in to mine bat cave. Oh Charlie. Mummys been so confused. So terribly silly...

Char lie blinked at me, sens ing an op por tu ni ty. Can I have an ice cream? he said. I hugged my son. I felt his warm, sleepy breath on my neck, and through the thin gray fab ric of his cos tume I felt the gen tle, in sis tent pres sure of the bones be neath his skin. I looked up at Lawrence and I said, Thank you. Eleven THE PO LICE MEN CAME AF TER five min utes. There were three of them. They came slow ly, in a sil ver car with bright blue and or ange stripes along the sides and a long bar of lights on the roof. They pushed through the crowds on the walk way and they stopped be side the steps that led down to the sand. They got out of the car and they put on their hats. They were wear ing white short-?sleeved shirts and thick black vests with a black-?and-?white check ered stripe. The vests had many pock ets, and in them there were ba tons and ra dios and hand cuffs and oth er things I could not guess the names of. I was think ing, Char lie would like this. These po lice men have more gad gets than Bat man. If I was telling this sto ry to the girls from back home, I would have to ex plain to them that the po lice men of the Unit ed King dom did not car ry guns. Weh! No pis tol? No pis tol. Weh! That is one top sy-?turvy king dom, where the girls can show their bob bis but the po lice can not show their guns. And I would have to nod and tell them again, Much of my life in that coun try was lived in such con fu sion. The po lice men slammed the po lice-?car doors be hind them: thunk. I shiv ered. When you are a refugee, you learn to pay at ten tion to doors. When they are open; when they are closed; the par tic ular sound they make; the side of them that you are on. I want ed to run. In stead I held my hands out to the po lice men. I said, Here is the place. One of the po lice men came close while the oth er two ran down the steps. The po lice man who came, he was not much old er than me I think. He was tall, with or ange hair un der his hat. I tried to smile at him, but I couldnt. My heart was beat ing, beat ing. I was scared that my Queens En glish would fail me. Then the most won der ful thing hap pened. The po lice mans ra dio buzzed and crack led and a voice came from it, and the voice said: THE CHILD HAS BEEN FOUND. I gave a smile like the sun, but the po lice man did not. My smile fad ed. If this po lice man be gan to sus pect me, he could call the

im mi gra tion peo ple. Then one of them would click a but ton on their com put er and mark a check box on my file and I would be de port ed. I would be dead, but no one would have fired any bul lets. I re al ized, this is why the po lice do not car ry guns. In a civ ilized coun try, they kill you with a click. The killing is done far away, at the heart of the king dom in a build ing full of com put ers and cof fee cups. I stared at the po lice man. He did not have a cru el face. He did not have a kind face ei ther. He was young and he was pale and there were no lines on his face. He was noth ing yet. He looked like an egg. This po lice man, if he opened the door of the po lice car and made me get in side, then to him it was on ly the in side of a car he was show ing me. But I would see things he could not see in it. I would see the bright red dust on the seats. I would see the old dried cas sava tops that had blown in to the foot wells. I would see the white skull on the dash board and the jun gle plants grow ing through the rust ed cracks in the floor and burst ing through the bro ken wind screen. For me, that car door would swing open and I would step out of Eng land and straight back in to the trou bles of my coun try. This is what they mean when they say, It is a small world these days. The po lice man looked at me with no ex pres sion. What is your re la tion ship to the per son who was re port ed as miss ing? It is not im por tant. Its pro ce dure, madam. He took a step to ward me and I stepped back, I could not help my self. You seem un usu al ly ner vous of me, madam. He said this very calm ly, look ing in to my eyes all the time. Your name, he said. Now. I stood up as straight and tall as I could, and I closed my eyes for a mo ment, and when I opened them again I looked at the po lice man very cold ly and I spoke with the voice of Queen Eliz abeth the Sec ond. How dare you? I said. It al most, al most worked. The po lice man took half a step back, as if I had hit him. He looked down at the ground and he blushed, just for one sec ond. But then I saw the strength come back in to his face. That is when I ran. My sto ry is not like the movie I told you about, The Man Who Was in a Great Hur ry. I did not have a mo tor bike to es cape on, or a plane that I could fly up side down. In my mind I saw how I would es cape through the crowds, with the po lice man chas ing af ter me and shout ing, Stop that girl! I would run across the road and the brakes of the cars would scream and their horns would hoot and a fat man would shout, Whad day athinkyadoin?, and then I would be running, run ning, and of course there would be a sell er of bright ly col ored fruits, and his ap ples and his or anges would spill all over the road, and there would be two men car ry ing a big sheet of glass, and I would roll un der it and the po lice men would crash through it and then I would get away and think to my self, Phew! That was a close one. That is how the sto ry went in my head. But in my life, the chase was not so good. My legs starte? Myd to run and the po lice man reached out his hand and grabbed hold of my arm, and that was it. If my life was a movie, it did not have a good chase scene. The au di ence would grum ble, and throw pop corn, and say to one an oth er, That fool ish African girl did not even make it to the edge of the screen. The po lice man opened the back door of the po lice car and he made me sit down. He left the door open while he talked in to his ra dio. He was thin, with pale slim wrists and a lit tle pot bel ly, like the de ten tion of fi cer who was on du ty on the morn ing they re leased us. The po lice car smelled of ny lon and cigarettes. If we could just start with your name. I felt very sad. I knew it was all over for me now. I could not give the po lice man my re al name, be cause then they would find out what I was. But I did not have a false name to give him ei ther. Jen nifer Smith, Al ison Jonesnone of these names are re al when you have no doc uments to go with them. Noth ing is true un less there is a screen that says it is, some where in that build ing full of com put ers and cof fee cups, right at the ex act cen ter of the Unit ed King dom. I sat up very straight in the back seat of the po lice car, and I took a breath and I looked the po lice man straight in the eye. My name is Lit tle Bee. Spell that for me please? L-?I-?T-?T-?L-?E-?B-?E-?E. And is that a first name or a sur name, madam? It is my whole name. That is who I am. The po lice man sighed, then he turned away and spoke in to his ra dio. Sier ra Four to con trol, he said, send out a unit, will you? Ive got one to bring in for fin ger prints. Prob ably a nut ter. He turned back to me, and he was not smil ing any more. Wait here, he said. He closed the car door. I sat for a long time. With out the breeze it was very hot in the back of the po lice car. I wait ed there un til an oth er set of po lice men came and took me away. They put me in to a van. I watched Sarah and Lawrence and Char lie dis ap pear ing in the back win dow, through a met al grille. Lawrence had his arm around Sarah, and she was lean ing against him. Sarah and Lawrence came to vis it me that night. I was in a hold ing cell at the po lice sta tion in Vaux hall. The po lice guard, he banged open the door without knock ing and Sarah walked in. Sarah was car ry ing Char lie. He was asleep in her arms with his head rest ing on her shoul der. I was so hap py to see Charlie safe, I cried. I kissed Char lie on the cheek. He twitched in his sleep, and he sighed. Through the holes in his bat mask, I could see that he was smil ing in his sleep. That made me smile too. Out side the cell, Lawrence was ar gu ing with a po lice of fi cer. This is a bit ex ces sive, isnt it? They shouldnt de port her. She has a home to

go to. She has a spon sor. Theyre not my rules, sir. The im mi gra tion peo ple are a law un to them selves. But sure ly you can give us a bit of time to make a case. I work for the Home Of fice, I can get an ap peal to geth er. If you dont mind my say ing so, sir, if I worked for the Home Of fice and I knew all along this la dy was il le gal, Id keep my mouth shut. And this, ex act ly, is what Lawrence did. I did not hear his voice af ter that. The guard looked in to the cell. Youve got five min utes, thats all, he said. Sarah was cry ing. I wont let them do it, she whis pered. Ill find a way. I wont let them send you back. I tried very hard to smile. Maybe you should not make a fuss. It would not be good for Lawrence, I think. Sarah pressed her face down to the top of Char lies head, and she breathed in his smell. Maybe Lawrence is go ing to have to look af ter him self, she whis pered. I shook my head. Sarah, I said. I do not de serve your help. You do not know ev ery thing about me. I think I know enough. Please lis ten, Sarah. I was there when An drew killed him self. What? Yes. And, if I tried hard er, I think I could have saved him. There was a long si lence be tween us. The on ly sound was Char lie breath ing in and out in his sleep. The guard came in to the cell. Times up, he said. Come on please madam, we need to lock up for the night. On the con crete floor of the cell I saw a tear splash, and I looked up in to Sarahs face. You know what the worst thing is? she said. If I had tried hard er, I sup pose I could have saved An drew too. When she went, the cell door closed be hind her with a noise like the boom of thun der on the first day of the rainy sea son. They came for me at four oclock in the morn ing. There were three uni formed im mi gra tion of fi cers, one wom an and two men. I heard their shoes bang ing on the linoleum of the cor ri dor. I had been awake all night, wait ing for them. I was still wear ing the sum mer dress that Sarah had giv en me, with the pret ty lace around the neck. I stood up, so I was wait ing for them when they banged open the door. We walked out of the cell. The door closed be hind me. Boom, went the door, and that was it. Out in the street it was rain ing. They put me in the back of a van. The road was wet and the head lights pushed streaks of light along it. One of the back win dows was half open. The back of the van had a smell of vom it, but the air that blew in smelled of Lon don. All along the streets the win dows of the apart ments were silent and blind, with their cur tains closed. I dis ap peared with out any one to see me go. The fe male of fi cer hand cuffed me to the back of the seat in front. It is not nec es sary to hand cuff me, I said. How could I run away? The fe male of fi cer looked back at me. She was sur prised. You s?%">peak pret ty good En glish, she said. Most of the peo ple we bring in dont speak a word. I thought if I learned to speak like you peo ple do, I would be able to stay. The of fi cer smiled. It doesnt mat ter how you talk, does it? she said. Youre a drain on re sources. The point is you dont be long here. The van turned the cor ner at the end of the street. I looked through the met al grille on the back win dow of the van and I watched two long rows of semide tached hous es dis ap pear. I thought about Char lie, fast asleep un der his du vet, and I thought of his brave smile, and my heart ached that I would nev er see him again. There were tears in my eyes. But please, what does it mean? I said. What does it mean, to be long here? The fe male of fi cer turned to look at me again. Well, youve got to be British, havent you? Youve got to share our val ues. I turned away from the wom an and looked out at the rain. Three days lat er a dif fer ent group of of fi cers took me from an oth er hold ing cell and they put me in a minibus with one oth er girl. They took us to Heathrow Air port. They took us straight through the queue at the air port ter mi nal and they put us in a small room. We were all wear ing hand cuffs. They told us to sit down on the floorthere were no chairs there. There were twen ty oth ers in the room, men and wom en, and it was very hot in there. There was no fresh air and it was dif fi cult to breathe. A guard was stand ing at the front of the room. She had a trun cheon and a can of pep per spray in her belt. I asked her, What is hap pen ing here? The guard smiled. She said, What is hap pen ing here is that a large num ber of fly ing ma chines that we call AERO PLANES are taking off and land ing on a long stretch of tar mac that we call a RUN WAY, be cause this is a place that we call an AIR PORT, and soon one of those aero planes is go ing to set off for UM-?BON GO LAND, where you come from, and youre go ing to be on it. Yeah? Whether you like it or bloody not. Now, has any one else got any ques tions? We wait ed for a long time. Some of the oth ers were tak en out of the room. One of them cried. An oth er, a thin man, he was an gry. He tried to re sist the guard, and she hit him twice in the stom ach with her trun cheon. Af ter that he was qui et. I fell asleep sit ting down. When I woke up, I saw a pur ple dress and long brown legs in front of me. Yevette! I said. The wom an turned around to look at me, but it was not Yevette. At first I was sad not to see my friend, and then I un der stood that I was hap py. If this was not Yevette, then there was a chance that Yevette was still free. I thought of her walk ing down the street in Lon don, in her pur ple flip-?flops with her eyebrows paint ed in pen cil, buy ing a pound of salt fish and laugh ing, WU-?ha-?ha-?ha! in to the bright blue sky. And I smiled. The wom an who was not Yevette, she made an an gry face at me. What is wrong with you? she said. You think?an>

they are send ing us on hol iday? I smiled. Yes, I said. I think it will be the hol iday of a life time. You should not joke about these things. She turned around and she would not talk to me any more, and when they called her to stand up for her flight, she walked away with out mak ing any trou ble and she did not once look back at me. When I saw her go, my sit ua tion be came re al for me and I was scared now, for the first time. I was scared of go ing back. I cried and I watched my own tears soak ing away in to the dirty brown car pet. They gave us no food or wa ter, and I be came faint. Af ter a few more hours they came for me. They walked me straight on to the aero plane. The oth er pas sen gers, the pay ing pas sen gers, they made them stand back while I went first up the aero plane steps. Ev ery body was star ing at me. They took me to the back of the aero plane, to the last row of seats be fore the toi lets. They put me in the seat next to the win dow and a guard sat down be side me, a big man with a shaved head and a gold ear ring. He wore a blue Nike T-?shirt and black Adi das trousers. He took off my hand cuffs, and I rubbed my wrists to bring the blood back in to my hands. Sor ry, said the man. I dont like this shit any more than you do. Then why do you do it? The man shrugged and did up his seat belt. Its a job, isnt it? he said. He pulled a mag aazine out of the seat pock et in front of him, and opened it up. There were mens wrist watch es there for sale, and al so a fluffy mod el of the aero plane that could be giv en to chil dren. You should do a dif fer ent job, if you do not like this one. No one choos es this job, love. I dont have qual ifi ca tions, do I? I used to do la bor ing, ca su al, but you cant com pete with the Pol skis now. The Poles will do a full days work for a kind word and a pack et of fags. So here I am, chap er on ing girls like you on the hol iday of a life time. Waste, re al ly, isnt it? I bet youre more em ploy able than I am. You should be es cort ing me, re al ly, shouldnt you? Back to this place were go ing, what ev er the name of it is again. Nige ria. Yeah, that was it. Hot there, is it? Hot ter than Eng land. Thought so. These places usu al ly are, where you peo ple come from. He went back to his mag aazine and he turned a few pages. Each time he turned the page, he licked his fin ger to make it stick. There were tat toos on the knuck les of his fin gers, small blue dots. His watch was big and gold but the gold was wear ing off. It looked like one of the watch es from the aero plane magazine. He turned a few more pages and then he looked up at me again. Dont say much, do you? I shrugged. Thats all right, he said. I dont mind. Rather that than the wa ter works. The w?%">ater works? Some of them cry. Some of the peo ple I es cort back. The wom en arent the worst, be lieve it or not. I had this bloke once, Zim bab we we were go ing to, sobbed away for six hours straight. Tears and snot ev ery where, like a ba by, I kid you not. It got em bar rass ing af ter a while. Some of the oth er pas sengers, you know? Giv ing it the looks, and all of that. I was like, cheer up mate, it might nev er hap pen, but it wasnt no good. He just kept cry ing and talk ing to him self in for eign. Some of you peo ple, Im sor ry to see you go, but this one, I tell you, I couldnt wait to sign him over. Good mon ey though, that job was. There was no flight out for three days, so they put me up at the Sher aton. Watched Sky Sports for three days, scratched my ar se, got paid time and a half. Course the peo ple who re al ly make the mon ey are the big con trac tors. The ones Im work ing for now, Dutch firm, they run the whole show. They run the de ten tion cen ters and they run the repa tri ations. So theyre earn ing ei ther way, whether we lock you up or whether we send you back. Nice, eh? Nice, I said. The man tapped his fin ger against the side of his head. But thats how youve got to think, these days, isnt it? Its the glob al econ omy. The plane be gan to roll back ward on the tar mac and some tele vi sion screens came down from the ceil ing. They start ed to show us a safe ty film. They said what we should do if the cab in filled with smoke, and they al so said where our life jack ets were kept in case we land ed on wa ter. I saw that they did not show us the po si tion to adopt in case we were de port ed to a coun try where it was like ly that we would be killed be cause of events we had wit nessed. They said there was more in for ma tion on the safe ty card in the seat pock et in front of us. There was a huge and ter ri fy ing roar, so loud that I thought, They have tricked us. I thought we were go ing on a jour ney, but ac tu al ly we are be ing destroyed. But then there was a great ac cel er ation, and ev ery thing start ed shak ing and ris ing up to a ter ri fy ing an gle, and sud den ly all the vi bra tion was gone and the sound died down and my stom ach went crazy. The man be side me, my guard, he looked at me and laughed. Re lax, love, were in the air. Af ter the take off, the cap tain came on the in ter com. He said it was a fine, sun ny day in Abu ja. I un der stood that for a few hours I was not in any ones coun try. I said to my self, Look here, Lit tle Beefi nal ly, you are fly ing. Buzz, buzz. I pressed my nose against the aero plane win dow. I watched the forests and the fields and the roads with their tiny cars, all those tiny pre cious lives. Me, I felt that my own life was al ready over. From very high up in the sky, all alone, I could see the curve of the world. And then I heard a voice, a kind and gen tle voice that was fa mil iar. Bee? said the voice. I turned from the win dow and saw Sarah. She was stand ing in the aisle and she was smil ing. Char lie was hold ing her hand and he was smil ing too. He was wear ing his

Bat man out fit and he was grin ning as if he had just killed all the bad dies. We is in the sky, isnt we? he said. No?="5 dar ling, said Sarah. We are in the sky, arent we. I did not un der stand what I was see ing. Sarah reached over the guard and she put her hand on my hand. Lawrence found out what flight they were putting you on, she said. Hes not en tire ly bad, at the end of the day. We couldnt let you go back alone, Bee. Could we Bat man? Char lie shook his head. Now he looked very solemn. No, he said. Be cause you is our friend. The guard, he did not know what to do. Ive seen bloody ev ery thing now, he said. Fi nal ly he stood up and made room for Sarah and Char lie to sit be side me. They hugged me while I cried, and the oth er pas sen gers turned around in their seats to stare at this mir acle, and the aero plane flew all of us in to the fu ture at five hun dred and fifty miles per hour. Af ter some time they brought us peanuts, and Co ca-?Co la in tiny cans. Char lie drank his too quick ly, and the Co ca-?Co la came out of his nose. Af ter Sarah cleaned him up, she turned to me. I did won der why An drew didnt leave a note, she said. And then I thought about it. It wasnt An draws style. He didnt re al ly like to write about himself. I nod ded. Any way, he left me some thing bet ter than a note. What? Sarah smiled. A sto ry. At Abu ja they opened the aero plane doors, and heat and mem ory rolled in. We walked across the tar mac through the shim mer ing air. In the ter mi nal build ing my guard signed me over to the au thor ities. Chee rio, he said. Best of luck, love. The mil itary po lice were wait ing for me in a small room, wear ing uni forms and gold-?framed sun glass es. They could not ar rest me be cause Sarah was with me. She would not leave my side. I am a British jour nal ist, she said. Any thing you do to this wom an, I will re port it. The mil itary po lice were un cer tain, so they called their com man der. The com man der came, in a cam ou flage uni form and a red beret, with trib al scars on his cheeks. He looked at my de por ta tion doc ument, and he looked at me and Sarah and Char lie. He stood there for a long time, scratch ing his bel ly and nod ding. Why is the child dressed in this fash ion? he said. Sarah looked straight back at him. She said, The child be lieves he has spe cial pow ers. The com man der grinned. Well, I am just a man, he said. I will not ar rest any of you at this time. Ev ery body laughed, but the mil itary po lice fol lowed our taxi from the air port. I was very fright ened but Sarah gripped my hand. I will not leave you, she said. So long as Char lie and I are here, you are safe. The po lice wait ed out side our ho tel. We stayed there for two weeks, and so did they. The win dow of our room looked out over Abu ja. Tal l?ver build ings stretched back for miles, tall and clean, some cov ered in sil ver glass that re flect ed the long, straight bou le vards. I watched the city as the sun set made the build ings glow red, and then I watched all night. I could not sleep. When the sun rose it shone be tween the hori zon and the base of the clouds. It blazed on the gold en dome of the mosque while the four tall tow ers were still lit up with elec tric lights. It was beau ti ful. Sarah came out on to the bal cony of our room, and she found me stand ing there and star ing. This is your city, she said. Are you proud? I did not know such a thing ex ist ed in my coun try. I am still try ing to feel that it is mine. I stood there all morn ing while the heat of the day grew stronger and the streets grew busy with car taxis and scoot er taxis and walk ing sell ers with their sway ing racks of T-?shirts and head-?scarves and medicine. Char lie sat in side, watch ing car toons with the air-?con di tion ing on, and Sarah laid out all of An draws pa pers on a long, low ta ble. On each pile of pa pers we placed a shoe, or a lamp or a glass, to stop them blow ing in the breeze from the big ma hogany fans that spun on the ceil ing. Sarah ex plained how she was go ing to write the book that An drew had been re search ing. I need to col lect more sto ries like yours, she said. Do you think we can do that here? With out go ing down to the south of the coun try? I did not an swer. I looked through some of the pa pers and then I went and stood on the bal cony again. Sarah came and stood be side me. What is it? she said. I nod ded my head down at the mil itary po lice car wait ing on the street be low. Two men leaned against it, in green uni forms with berets and sun glass es. One of them looked up. He said some thing when he saw us, and his col league looked up too. They stared up at our bal cony for a long time, and then they lit cigarettes and sat in the car, one in the front seat and one in the back seat, with the doors open and their heavy boots rest ing on the tar mac. You know it is not a good idea to col lect sto ries, I said. Sarah shook her head. I dont agree. I think its the on ly way well make you safe. What do you mean? Sarah lift ed her eyes up from the street. Our prob lem is that you on ly have your own sto ry. One sto ry makes you weak. But as soon as we have one hun dred sto ries, you will be strong. If we can show that what hap pened to your vil lage hap pened to a hun dred vil lages, then the pow er is on our side. We need to col lect the sto ries of peo ple whove been through the same things as you. We need to make it un de ni able. Then we can send the sto ries to a lawyer and well let the au thor ities know, if any thing hap pens to you, those sto ries will go straight to the me dia. Do you see? I think that was what An drew hoped to do with his book. It was his way of sav ing girls like you. I shrugged. What if the au thor ities are not afraid of the me dia? Sarah nod ded, slow ly. Thats a pos si bil ity, she said. I dont know.



What do you think? I looked out across the towers of Abuja. The great buildings shimmered in the heat, as if they were in substantial, as if they could be awakened from and forgotten with a splash of cold water to the face. I do not know, I said. I do not know how things are in my country. Until I was fourteen years old my country was three cassava fields and a limba tree. And after that, I was in yours. So do not ask me how my country works. Hmm, said Sarah. She waited for a minute, and then she said, So what do you want us to do? I looked again at the city we saw from that balcony. I saw for the first time how much space there was in it. There were wide gaps between the city blocks. I thought these dark green squares were parks and gardens, but now I saw that they were just empty spaces, waiting for something to be built. Abuja was a city that was not finished. This was very interesting for me, to see that my capital city had these green squares of hope built into it. To see how my country carried its dreams in a see-through bag. I smiled at Sarah. Let us go and collect the stories. You're sure? I want to be part of my country's story. I pointed out into the heat. See? They have left space for me. Sarah held on to my hand, very tight. All right, she said. But, Sarah? Yes? There is one story I must tell you first. I told Sarah what happened when An drew died. The story was hard to hear and it was hard to tell. Afterwards I went back inside the hotel room and she stayed out on the balcony on her own. I sat down on the bed with Charlie and he watched cartoons while I watched Sarah's shoulders shaking. The next day we started our work. Early in the morning Sarah walked out into the street and she gave a very large amount of money to the military police men waiting outside the hotel. After this, their eyes were the eyes of the faces on the banknotes that Sarah gave them. They saw nothing but the inside of the military police cars' glove box and the lining of the police men's uniform pockets. The police men's only rule was, we had to be back at the hotel before sunset each evening. My job was to find people who would normally be scared to talk to a foreign journalist, but who talked to Sarah because I promised them that she was a good person. These were people who believed what I told them, because my story was the same as theirs. I discovered there were a lot of us in my country, people who had seen things the oil companies wished we had not seen. People the government would prefer to be silent. We went all around the south east of my country in an old white Peugeot, just like the one that my father used to have. I sat in the passenger seat and Sarah drove, with Charlie smiling and laughing in the back. We listened to the music on the local radio stations, turned up very loud. The red dust from the road blew everywhere, even inside the car, and when we took off Charlie's Batman suit to wash him at the end of each day, his white skin had two bright red diamonds on it, where the eye holes of his mask had been. Some times I go?>Sot scared. Some times when we arrived in a village, I saw the way some of the men looked at me and I remembered how me and my sister were hunted. I wondered if there was still money from the oil companies, for any one who would shut my mouth for once and all. I was scared of the village men, but Sarah just smiled. Relax, she said. Remember what happened at the airport. Nothings going to happen to you so long as I'm here. And I did begin to relax. In each village I found people with stories, and Sarah wrote them down. It was easy. We started to be happy. We thought we had done enough to save ourselves. We thought, this is a good trick. One night when we had been in my country for two weeks, I dreamed of my sister Nkiruka. She walked up out of the sea. First the surface of the water swirled from the movement of something unseen and then, in the hollow between two waves, I saw the top of her head with white foam dancing around it. Then my sister's face rose above the water and slowly she walked up the beach toward me and she stood there smiling and wearing the Hawaiian shirt that I was wearing when they released me from detention. It was soaked with salt water. My sister spoke my name once, and then she waited. When Sarah woke up, I went to her. Please, I said, we have to go to the sea. I must say good-bye to my sister. Sarah looked at me for a long time, and then she nodded. We did not say anything. That morning Sarah gave the police men much more money than before. We drove south to Benin City and we got there in the late afternoon. We stayed overnight in another hotel that was just the same, and the next morning we drove south again, to the coast. We left early, when the sun was still low in the sky and the light shining into the car windows was warm and golden. Charlie sighed and banged his heels on the back seat. Is we nearly there yet? he said. Sarah smiled at him in the rearview mirror. Nearly, darling, she said. The road ran out at one of the fishing villages they have in that place, and we stepped down onto the sand. Charlie laughed and ran down the beach to make sand castles. I sat on the beach next to Sarah and we looked out over the ocean. There was no sound except for the waves breaking on the beach. After a long time, Sarah turned to me. She said, I'm proud we've come this far. I took her hand. You know, Sarah, since I left my country, often I think to myself, how would I explain these things to the girls back home? Sarah laughed and stretched her hands along the beach in both directions. Well? said Sarah. How

would you explain this to the girls back home? I mean, this would take some explaining, wouldn't you say? I shook my head. I would not explain this to the girls back home. No? No, Sarah. Because today I am saying good-bye to all that. We are the girls back home now. You and me. There is nothing else for me to go back to. I do not need to tell this story to any one else. Thank you for saving me, Sarah. When I said this I saw that Sarah was? crying, and then I was crying too. When the day became hotter, the beach filled up with people. There were fishermen who walked out in to the waves and sent wide bright nets spinning out before them, and there were old men who came to sit and look at the sea, and mothers who brought their children to splash in the water. We should go and ask these people if any one has a story, I said. Sarah smiled and pointed at Charlie. Yes, but it can wait, she said. Look, he's having such fun. Charlie was running and laughing and I can tell you that a dozen of the local children were running with him, and laughing and shouting because if there is one thing you do not see very often on the beach in my country, it is a white superhero less than one meter in height, with sand and salt water on his cape. Charlie was laughing with the other children, running and playing and chasing. It was hot, and I dug my toes down in to the cooler sand. Sarah, I said. How long do you think you will stay? I don't know. Do you want to try coming with me to England? We could try to get you papers this time. I shrugged. They do not want people like me. Sarah smiled. I'm English and I want people like you. Surely I'm not the only one. People will say you are naive. Sarah smiled. Let them, she said. Let them say whatever gives them comfort. We sat for a long time and watched the sea. In the afternoon the sea breeze blew and I fell asleep for a little while, half in and half out of the shade of the trees at the top of the beach. The sun warmed my blood until I could not keep my eyes open, and the sea roared in and out, in and out, and my breathing slipped in to time with the waves as I began to dream. I dreamed we all stayed together in my country. I was happy. I dreamed I was a journalist, telling the stories of my country, and we all lived in the same house and Charlie and Sarah in a tall, cool three-story house in Abuja. It was a very beautiful home. It was the sort of place I never even dreamed of, back in the days when our Bible ended at the twenty-seventh chapter of Matthew. I was happy in this house that I dreamed of, and the cook and the housekeeper smiled at me and called me princess. Early each morning the garden boy brought me a scented yellow rose for my hair, trembling on its fine green stem with the dew of the night still on it. There was a carved wooden veranda, painted white, and a long curved garden with bright flowers and dark shade. I traveled through my country and I listened to stories of all kinds. Not all of them were sad. There were many beautiful stories that I found. There was horror, yes, but there was joy in them too. The dreams of my country are no different from yours; they are as big as the human heart. In my dream Lawrence telephoned Sarah to ask when she was coming home. Sarah looked across the veranda at Charlie, playing with his building blocks, and she smiled and she said, What do you mean? We are home. It was the sound of the surf pounding on the beach that woke me. Crash, like the drawer of a cash register springing open and all the coins inside it smashing against the edge of their compartments. The surf pounded and ebbed, the cash drawer opened and closed. There is a moment when you wake up from dreaming in the hot sun, a moment outside time when you do not know what you are. At first, because you feel absolutely free, as if you could transform yourself in to any thing at all, it seems that you must be monkey. But then you feel the hot breath of something on your face and it seems that no, you are not monkey, you must be that hot breeze blowing in from the sea. It seems that the heaviness you feel in your limbs is the weight of the salt in the wind, and the sweet sleepiness that bewitches you is simply the weariness that comes from the day-and-night pushing of waves across the ocean. But next you realize that no, you are not the breeze. In fact you can feel sand drifting up against your bare skin. And for an instant you are the sand that the breeze blows up the beach, just one grain of sand among the billions of blown grains. How nice to be in consequence. How pleasant to know that there is nothing to be done. How sweet simply to go back to sleep, as the sand does, until the wind thinks to awaken it again. But then you understand that no, you are not the sand, because this skin that the sand drifts up against, this skin is your own. Well then, you are a creature with skin and what of it? It is not as if you are the first creature that fell asleep under the sun, listening to the sound of waves pounding. A billion fishes have slipped away like this, flapping on the blinding white sand, and what difference will one more make? But the moment carries on, and you are not a fish; in fact you are not even truly sleeping and so you open your eyes and look down on yourself and you say Ah, so I am a girl, then, an African girl. This is what I am and this is how I will stay, as the shape-changing magic of dreams whisks me back in to the roar of the ocean. I sat up and blinked and looked around. A white woman was sitting next to me on the beach, in the thing called shade, and I remembered that the white woman's name was

Sarah. I saw her face, with her wide eyes staring away down the beach. She looked I searched for the name of her expression in your languages she looked frightened. Oh my god, Sarah was saying. I think we need to get away from here. I smiled sleepily. Yes yes, I was thinking. We always need to get away from here. Wherever here is, there is always a good reason to get away from it. That is the story of my life. Always running, running, running, without one single moment of peace. Some times, when I remember my mother and my father and my big sister Nkiruka, I think I will always be running until the day I am reunited with the dead. Sarah grabbed my hand and tried to pull me up. Get up, Bee, she said. There are soldiers coming. Up the beach. I breathed in the hot, salty smell of the sand. I sighed. I looked in the direction Sarah was staring. There were six soldiers. They were still a long way away, along the beach. The air above the sand was so hot that it dissolved the men's legs into a shimmer, a green confusion of colors, so that the soldiers seemed to be floating toward us on a cloud made of some enchanted substance, free as the thoughts of a girl waking up from dreams on a hot beach. I screwed up my eyes against the glare and I saw the light gleaming on the barrels of the soldiers' rifles. These rifles were more distinct than the men who carried them. They held their firm, straight lines while the men beneath them shimmered. In this way the weapons rode their men like mules, proud and gleaming in the sun, knowing that when a beast beneath them died, they would simply ride another one. This is how the future rode out to meet me in my country. The sun shone on its rifles and it pounded on my bare head too. I could not think. It was too hot and too late in the afternoon. Why would they come for us here, Sarah? I'm sorry, Bee. It's those police men in Abuja, isn't it? I thought I'd paid them enough to close their eyes for a few days. But someone must have put the word out. I suppose they must have seen us in Sapele. I knew it was true, but I pretended that it was not. That is a good trick. That is called, saving one minute of the quietest part of the late afternoon while the whole of time is ending. Maybe the soldiers are just going for a walk by the sea, Sarah. Any way, this is a long beach. They will not know who we are. Sarah put her hand on my cheek and she turned my head until I was looking in her eyes. Look at me, she said. Look how bloody white I am. Do you see any other women on the beach this color? So? They'll be looking out for a girl with a white woman and a white boy. Just walk away from us, okay, Bee? Go down to the point down there, where those other women are, and don't look around till the soldiers have gone. If they take me and Charlie, don't worry. There's no way they'll do anything to us. Charlie held on to Sarah's leg and looked up at her. Mummy, he said, why is Little Bee got to go? It's not for long, Batman. Just until the soldiers have gone. Charlie put his hands on his hips. I don't want Little Bee to go, he said. She has to hide, darling, said Sarah. Just for a few minutes. Why? said Charlie. Sarah stared out to sea, and the expression on her face was the saddest thing I ever saw. She answered Charlie, but she turned to me when she spoke. Because we still haven't done enough to save her, Charlie. I thought we had, but we need to do more. And we will do more, darling. We will. We won't ever give up on Little Bee. Because she is part of our family now. And until she is happy and safe, then I don't think we will be either. Charlie held on to my leg. I want to go with her, he said. Sarah shook her head. I need you to stay and look after me, Batman. Charlie shook his head. He was not happy. I looked away down the beach. The soldiers were half a mile away. They came slowly, looking left and right, checking the faces of the people on the beach. Some times they stopped and did not continue on their way until someone showed them papers. I nodded, slowly. Thank you, Sarah. I walked down the slope of the beach to the hard sand where the waves were breaking. I looked out at the hazy horizon and I followed the deep blue-and-in di go of the ocean from that distant line all the way to the beach where it crashed in to waves of white spray and sent its last thin sheets of water foaming and hissing up the sand to sink away to nothing in the place where my feet were standing. I saw how it ended there. The wet sand under my feet made me think of how it was when the men took me and Nkiruka away, and for the first time I began to be fearful. I was fully awake now. I knelt down in the shore break and I splashed the cold salt water over my head and my face until I could think clearly. Then I walked quickly along the beach to the point that Sarah had shown me. The point was two or three minutes away. A tall ridge of dark gray rock came out of the jungle there at the height of the tree tops, and it ran across the sand and then out in to the sea, getting shorter as it went but still as high as two men at the point of the rock, where it stuck out in to the surf. The waves crashed against it and sent explosions of white foam in to the silver-blue sky. In the shade of the rock it was suddenly cold, and my skin shivered when it touched the dark stone. There were some local women resting in the shade there, sitting on the hard sand with their backs against the rock while their children played all around them, jumping over their mothers legs and running in to the shore break, laughing and daring one another to go out in to the white roaring foam where the great

waves crashed against the point of the rock. I sat down with the other women and smiled at them. They smiled back and talked in their language, but I did not understand it. The women smelled of sweat and wood smoke. I looked back along the beach. The soldiers were close now. The women around me, they were watching the soldiers too. When the soldiers were close enough to notice the color of Sarah's skin, I saw them start to walk faster. They stopped in front of Sarah and Charlie. Sarah stood very straight and she stared at the soldiers with her hands on her hips. The leader of the soldiers stepped forward. He was tall and relaxed, with his rifle riding high on his shoulder and his hand scratching the top of his head. I could see he was smiling. He said something and I watched Sarah shake her head. The head soldier stopped smiling then. He shouted at Sarah. I heard the shout but I could not hear what he said. Sarah shook her head again, and she pushed Charlie behind her legs. Around me the local women were staring and saying, Weh, but the children were still playing in the shore break and they had not noticed what was occurring farther down the beach. The leader of the soldiers, he took the gun down from his shoulder and he pointed it at Sarah. The other soldiers gathered in close and they unslung their weapons too. The leader shouted again. Sarah just shook her head. The leader pulled back the barrel of his gun then and I thought he was going to push it into Sarah's face, but just then Charlie broke away and he started to run down the beach toward the rocky point where we were sitting. He ran with his head down and his Batman cape fluttering behind him, and at first the soldiers just laughed and watched him go. But the leader of the soldiers, he was not laughing. He shouted something at his men, and one of them raised his rifle and swung it round to point at Charlie. The women around me, they gasped. One of them screamed. It was a crazy, shocking sound. At first I thought it was a seabird right beside me and my head snapped around to look, and when I turned back toward where Charlie?ardie was running, I saw a jet of sand flying up from the hard beach beside him. At first I did not know what it was, but then I heard the rifle shot that had made it. Then I screamed too. The soldier was swinging the barrel of his rifle, taking aim again. That was when I stood up and I started to run toward Charlie. I ran so hard my breath was burning and I screamed at the soldiers, Don't shoot, don't shoot, I AM THE ONE THAT YOU WANT, and I ran with my eyes half closed and one hand spread out in front of my face as if that would protect me from the bullet that would come for me. I ran, cringing like a dog from the whip, but the bullet did not come. The leader of the soldiers, he shouted out an order and his man put down his rifle. All of the soldiers stood there then, with their hands at their sides, watching. Charlie and me, we came to gether halfway between the rocky point and the soldiers. I knelt and I held out my arms to him. His face was twisted with terror and I held him while he cried against my chest. I waited for the soldiers to come and get me, but they did not. The leader stood there and he watched, and I saw the way he slung his rifle back on his shoulder and lifted his hand to scratch his head again. I saw Sarah, with her hands behind her head, pulling at her hair and screaming to be let go while one of the soldiers restrained her. After a long time Charlie stopped sobbing and he turned his face up toward mine. I peeled back his Batman mask a little, so I could see his face, and he smiled at me. I smiled back at him, in that moment that the soldiers' leader gave me, that one minute of dignity he offered me as one human being to another before he sent his men across the hard sand to fetch me. Here it was then, finally: the quietest part of the late afternoon. I smiled down at Charlie, and I understood that he would be free now even if I would not. In this way the life that was in me would find its home in him now. It was not a sad feeling. I felt my heart take off lightly like a butterfly and I thought, yes, this is it, something has survived in me, something that does not need to run any more, because it is worth more than all the money in the world and its currency, its true home, is the living. And not just the living in this particular country or in that particular country, but the secret, irresistible heart of the living. I smiled back at Charlie and I knew that the hopes of this whole human world could fit inside one soul. This is a good trick. This is called, globalization. Everything will be all right for you, Charlie, I said. But Charlie was not listening already he was giggling and kicking and struggling to be put down. He stared over my shoulder at the local children, still playing in the shore break around the rocky point. Let me go! Let me go! I shook my head. No Charlie. It is a very hot day. You can not run around in your costume like that or you will boil, I am telling you, and then you will be no good to us at all to fight the bad dies. Take off your Batman costume, right now, and then you will just be yourself and you can go to cool off in the sea. No! Please Charlie, you must. It is for your health. Charlie shook his head. I stood him in the sand and I knelt down beside him and I whispered in his ear. Charlie, I said, do you remember when I promised you, if you took off your costume, that I?cos would tell you my real name? Charlie nodded. So do you still want to know my real name? Charlie tilted his head to one side so that both of the ears of his mask flopped over.

Then he tilted it to the other side. Then finally he looked straight at me. What is your real name? he whispered. I smiled. My name is Udo. Ooh-?doh? That is it. Udo means, peace. Do you know what peace is, Charlie? Charlie shook his head. Peace is a time when people can tell each other their real names. Charlie grinned. I looked over his shoulder. The soldiers were walking across the sand toward us now. They were walking slowly, with their rifles in their hands pointing down at the sand, and while the soldiers walked, the waves rolled in to the beach and crashed up on the sand one by one at this final end of their journey. The waves rolled and rolled and there was no end to the power of them, cold enough to wake a young girl from dreams, loud enough to tell and retell the future. I bent my head and I kissed Charlie on the forehead. He stared at me. Udo? he said. Yes Charlie? I am going to take off my Batman costume now. The soldiers were almost on us now. Hurry then, Charlie, I whispered. Charlie pulled off the mask first, and the local children...

If your face is swollen from the severe beatings of life, smile and pretend to be a fat man.

Nigerian proverb notes THANK YOU FOR READING this story. The characters in it are...

1. Which are operational in the United Kingdom at the time...

3. 4. Occasionally in the novel, real-world elements have been introduced into the text which I hereby acknowledge. (If I have unintentionally missed some, I hope I will be forgiven.) The novel begins with a quotation, complete with the original typo, from the UK Home Office publication *Life in the United Kingdom* (2005), fifth printing. However long the moon disappears, some day it must shine again is taken from [www.Motherlandnigeria.Com](http://www.Motherlandnigeria.Com). The Ave Maria in the Ibo language is taken from the Christus Rex et Redemptor Mundi web site at [www.Christusrex.Org](http://www.Christusrex.Org). The rather brilliant line We do not see how anybody can abuse an excess of sanitary towels is taken verbatim from the transcript of the Bedfordshire County Council special report of July 18, 2002, in to the fire at the Yarl's Wood Immigration Detention Centre on February 14, 2002, where it is attributed to Lorraine Bayley of the Campaign to Stop Arbitrary Detention at Yarl's Wood. I have tried, with whatever success the reader will judge, to make the characters' speech patterns plausible. For the most part my work is based on close listening, although some Nigerian English idioms are from *A Dictionary of Nigerian English* [draft] by Roger Blench and *A Dictionary of Nigerian English Usage* by Herbert Igboanusi, Eni Crown Publishers, Jan. 1, 2001; some Jamaican English idioms are from *A Dictionary of Jamaican English* by F. G. Cassidy and R. B. Le Page, University of the West Indies Press, Jan. 31, 2002; and some four-year-old English idioms are from my son, Batman. Details of the UK immigration detention system were...

(If this or other links stop working, the documents will be available from my web site at [www.ChrisCleave.Com](http://www.ChrisCleave.Com).) Background on the medical and social aspects of immigration and asylum was provided by Dr. Mina Fazel, Bob Hughes, and Teresa Hayter. Original interviews with them can be found on my web site. The novel's hits are down to the kind people who helped me; the misses are all mine. Acknowledgments

THANKS TO ANDY PATERSON and Olivia Paterson for excellent notes on my early draft. Thanks to Sharon Maguire and Anand Tucker for their warmth and support. Thanks also to Bob Hughes, Teresa Hayter, and Christine Bacon for their hospitality, their encouragement, and for reading my manuscript and offering suggestions. I owe a great deal to Suzie Doore, Jennifer Joel, Maya Mavjee, Marysue Rucic, and Peter Straus, whose several patient readings and insightful editorial notes on my drafts have been invaluable. Thank you. About the author CHRIS CLEAVE IS A novelist and a columnist for *The Guardian*...

His bestselling novel, *Incendiary*, was published in twenty...

Inspired by his early childhood in West Africa and by an...

He lives in London with his French wife and two mischievous...

He keeps his web site at [www.ChrisClev.com](http://www.ChrisClev.com). Home Office UK Border Agency; see <http://www.Bia.HomeOffice.gov.uk/managingborder/immigration/removalcentres/>. US Energy Information Administration, Top World Oil Net Exporters 2006. UK Office for National Statistics, Applications received